

The background is a vibrant blue with intricate white patterns. The top left corner features a dense cluster of white swirls and snowflakes. The bottom right corner also has a similar pattern of swirls and snowflakes. The central area is a plain white space where the text is located. The overall theme is winter and fantasy.

*Once Upon*

*a Frost Fair*

*A Capturing the Carlises Short Story*

*Anna Harrington*

*Thames River Frost Fair*  
*Christmastide, 1814*

Mariah Winslow rolled her sixteen-year-old eyes as Bonnie McGill, a fellow classmate at Miss Pettigrew's School for the Education and Refinement of Young Ladies, waved flirtatiously at one of the young men who went skating past on the ice-covered Thames. Craning his neck to get a good look at Bonnie's golden curls and pink cheeks, he lost his balance and tripped, sliding across the ice and coming to a stop at the feet of his comrades, who all hooted with laughter. But the lad didn't seem to feel one bit of embarrassment, not with Bonnie's flirtatious smile to console him.

Life wasn't fair. *That* was the main lesson Mariah had learned in the past two years of exile at Miss Pettigrew's. Some girls took easily to their new-found femininity as blossoming young ladies, instinctively knowing how to be flirtatious in a way that made a boy go all silly. Some girls had to learn to be appealing, making up through study what nature forgot to bestow.

And then, there was Mariah. Who wouldn't know how to interact with young men if her life depended upon it.

Although, truly, why would she want to? She had more important things to worry about than talking to boys. After all, one day, she would be at Papa's side in running Winslow Shipping and Trade, and what would she care then whether she caught young men's attentions?

"Mariah!"

Her younger sister Evelyn beamed happily as she raced up to her across the ice as quickly as possible, clasping a bag of roasted chestnuts in her mittened hand. She wrapped her arm around Mariah's.

"Isn't the frost fair magnificent?" Excitement lit her fourteen-year-old face, and she practically bounced with exhilaration. "It's the most wonderful holiday ever!"

A pang of bittersweet emotion pierced her. Evie was too young to remember the Christmastide holidays they'd celebrated before Mama died, when the house had been filled with evergreen boughs and paper streamers, when they'd played games and made wassail for Twelfth Night, when they'd returned from church on Christmas Eve to discover that the baby Jesus had left gifts for them. They'd opened their house on Christmas Day to the families of the men who worked for Winslow Shipping, celebrating with all kinds of wonderful sweets, candies, savories, and punches. But St Stephen's Day was the best of all...the day after Christmas when all the servants would be given the day off after receiving their Christmas boxes, which Mariah and Mama had filled with food and gifts that the servants could take to their families when they went home to visit them for the day. And then the house belonged only to the four of them,

with Papa home from work and lavishing his attentions on them. He would roast apples on sticks over the fire while Mama played the pianoforte, and they'd all sing and laugh until their sides hurt, only to be carried upstairs to bed after falling asleep in Papa's arms.

Holidays now were nothing but a pale shadow of that. Papa spent more time at the shipping offices in Wapping than he ever had before, as if he didn't want to face the memories of Christmases past, and the house remained undecorated and closed to visitors.

But she didn't want to ruin Evie's fun by reminding her of all that. So she forced a smile and dissembled, "I'm glad you're having a good time."

"A simply marvelous time!" Then her eyes narrowed knowingly, and her excitement vanished. "But you're not."

Mariah knew not to dissemble. Evie knew her too well. So she admitted with a sigh, "That's because I don't want to be here."

The *very* last place she wanted to spend her holiday from school was at the frost fair, suffering through the awkward interactions with other people her age, when what she wanted was to be at the shipping offices, helping Papa with the business, or at home, decorating the house like they used to. But when Papa learned that several of her classmates from school would be attending tonight, he insisted that she and Evie join them.

But he had no idea how uncomfortable it was for her, to be ignored by her schoolmates now that they were home in London...to be ignored by the young men who paid her about as much mind as a piece of firewood. To miss her mother so much at this time of year that she thought her chest might burst from the

pain of it.

“But it’s lovely,” Evie pressed, with a sweep of her arm to indicate the evening around them.

Twilight had fallen across London, and beneath the purples and oranges that clung stubbornly to the horizon, the fair glowed with light and warmth, with fires lit across the ice and strings of paper lanterns crisscrossing between stalls and booths where puddings and sticky buns were sold, along with trinkets and other small gifts of all kinds. The savory-sweet scent of roasting chestnuts lingering deliciously on the chilly winter air mixed with the scent of roasted oxen, while toasts of cider and wassail went round and music wafted over the entire fair. Boughs of holly and pine decorated the booths and stalls. Someone had even strung up bunches of mistletoe everywhere, which were being taken advantage of by sweethearts who paused beneath them to kiss.

“Yes,” Mariah agreed grudgingly with a piqued sniff. “I *suppose* it is nice.”

Evie practically glowed as she sighed, “It’s so romantic!”

Mariah rolled her eyes. Of course, her sister would think it romantic. Evie would think a dungeon romantic if it were bathed in lamplight and involved the possibility of stealing kisses.

Evie lowered her voice, for fear of being overheard by the crowd around them, “And all the handsome young men, Mariah.” Her voice trembled with excitement. “Aren’t they simply dashing?”

*That* she didn’t agree with at all. “Dashing, all right,” she muttered as one of them went skating wildly past, away from the circle of smooth ice that had been swept clean of snow. So close that she had to duck aside to keep from being hit. He’d paid not one whit of attention to her.

“He likes you!” Evie exclaimed, beaming.

Mariah scoffed, “He does not. He didn’t even slow down.”

“Because he wanted to show off for you.” Her sister’s eyes sparkled, and Mariah felt her chest ache. If only she could be as optimistic as Evie, but she knew better. “Look! He’s stopped to talk to his friends.” She nodded toward a group of young men gathered at the edge of the fair, just beyond the lantern light.

“You should go talk to him.”

Fear knotted her belly. “Don’t be silly! What would I say?”

“Anything.” She shrugged, as if it were obvious. “Mariah, you are pretty and interesting, and any of them would be honored to have you start a conversation with them.”

She wasn’t so certain. Unless it was a conversation about what a goose she was. Her shoulders sagged beneath a mix of frustration and embarrassment. “You know I’m not good at things like that.”

“Then you should practice.”

“Practice what, exactly?” Especially since she’d never been taught anything about getting the attention of young men. Other misses had mothers to teach them, but all Mariah could do was watch her schoolmates interact with the lads and try to learn from that. And it was proving to be about as successful as her pianoforte lessons. “Making a fool of myself?”

Evie’s face fell, and worry dulled her eyes. “At least try to enjoy yourself. It’s the holidays, and you should enjoy yourself before we have to go back to school.” She hugged her tightly, then stepped back as one of her friends called out for her from near where a game of snapdragon had sprung up. “You never know. You might actually have fun!”

With another hug, she ran off to join her friends.

Mariah bit her bottom lips as she stared after her. Maybe Evie was right. Maybe she needed to make an effort to meet more young men. And what was the worst that could happen, truly?

“My complete humiliation,” she muttered to herself.

With a deep sigh, she reached into her pocket for her mother’s broach, and her throat tightened at the sight of it. Specially made with her mother’s silhouette, the ivory and gold cameo went with her everywhere because she missed Mama so terribly that her chest burned from it.

Shining in the dying light, the little piece tugged at Mariah’s heart. Would her mother think her a coward for not being more courageous when it came to meeting young men? Would she have possessed Evie’s romantic optimism...or would she have pitied Mariah for being so backward when it came to matters of the heart?

Either way, Mama certainly wouldn’t be proud of her hesitation. So she inhaled a deep breath to gather her resolve, and clasping the broach in her gloved hand for courage, she turned to walk toward the group of young men. Her shoulders squared, a bright smile on her face—

Suddenly, the group of men broke into raucous laughter. Chasing each other, they raced on their skates across the ice, directly toward her. She gasped as they flew past, so close she felt the rush of air of their bodies speeding past. The young man who had raced past before accidentally caught her arm and spun her in a circle, throwing her off balance. Her feet slipped out from beneath her on the ice, and she fell, landing on her bottom with a bounce.

Humiliation heated her cheeks as she sat there on the ice and somehow managed to choke back her frustrated tears.

“Are you hurt?” A concerned voice asked from behind her.

Blinking hard, she glanced over her shoulder...and into the bluest pair of eyes she’d ever seen. And at the handsome young man behind them who knelt beside her on the snow-dusted ice. He was of an age to be at university, with golden blond hair peaking out beneath his beaver hat, a caped great coat lying across broad shoulders, and black trousers stretched tight over muscular thighs.

“Just my pride,” she forced out, despite the large bruise that was surely forming on her bottom. “I’m fine.”

The concern on his face melted into a charming grin, one that made her heart stutter. He held out his hand. “You dropped this.”

Mama’s broach. With a sigh of relief that it wasn’t lost, she gratefully took it. Her eyes stung with blurring tears as she glanced down at it and once more wondered what her mother would think of her if she saw her like this.

Still kneeling beside her on the ice, he glanced over her head in the direction where the young men had skated off. “Viscount Houghton’s sons.” His eyes narrowed. “You’re friends with them?”

“No.” At this rate, they’d never notice that she was even alive.

“Good. Because most likely they knocked you down on purpose.”

Her lips twisted in chagrin. So they’d noticed her, all right—only so they could humiliate her.

“Most likely a childish attempt to gain your attention,” he murmured thoughtfully, his gaze still on the boys as they darted through the fair and laughed at the havoc they caused. “Whereas



I know the true secret to getting a young lady's attention."

Well, he certainly possessed confidence. Yet she couldn't help but ask, "Which is?"

His grin returned, if only to ease the embarrassment that was most likely visible on her face. "To come swooping in to help her after other men have made nodcocks of themselves." He winked at her. "Makes me heroic by default."

His charm was infectious. "I don't believe that I'm a damsel in distress," she chided teasingly. But when she tried to stand, she couldn't find her footing on the ice.

"Distress takes all forms," he tossed out as he took her arm and helped her to her feet, then frowned when she inhaled sharply at the pain from her bruised bottom. Before she could return some barb at that, he offered, "Let's rest a bit, all right?"

Grudgingly, she let him lead her to a wooden beam that had been dragged out onto the ice to mark the edge of the fair. With his help, she sat gingerly, only to be surprised when he sat down next to her rather than returning to the festivities.

"Surely, a university man has better things to do than nanny a school girl," she said with chagrin. Especially one who had behaved like an utter goose. Her schoolmates would never have been so foolish. They would have recognized those young men for what they were and avoided them.

"The first thing they teach us at university is to play to our strengths." He playfully nudged her shoulder with his. "What kind of man would I be if I left a pretty young lady all alone?"

She smiled at his sardonic conceit. "They're teaching you to become a rake?"

He made a distasteful face. "They're forcing us to learn Latin. I'd rather learn something useful."

She pressed, her lips twitching with amusement. "Like how to be a rake?"

He laughed, the sound deep and masculine on the evening air. Night had fallen, leaving them in shadowy darkness, while around them London and the fair was coming to life beneath a sea of lamps. The din from the festival surrounded them like a soft cocoon, muted by the chilly air.

"Must not be learning my lessons very well," he murmured. "Because if I were a true rake, I'd have caught you in my arms before you hit the ice."

Her breath caught in her throat, and she couldn't resist sliding a sideways glance toward his arms. *Definitely* muscular enough to catch her. A part of her wished he'd been able to do just that. "Then you'll have to learn to be faster."

"At least I might find that lecture interesting." He grinned at her when she smiled at his wholly inappropriate teasing. Then he asked quietly, "Why would a lovely young lady be off by herself, approaching someone like Burton Williams and his brothers, when she has all of the frost fair to enjoy?"

Her cheeks heated, and thank goodness for the darkness, because she was certain they'd turned as red as her scarf. But she had no idea how to answer. Not without revealing herself to be a silly cake.

He mused, "Could it be that all the other misses have paired off for conversations with young men, but you were alone?"

"That isn't it at all!" She gave a loud, indignant sniff. "I have better things to do than go chasing after—"

He silently arched a disbelieving brow.

The words choked in her throat, and she turned her face away. Drat this man, whoever he was! "I don't know how to

strike up a conversation with young men, all right?" she blurted out, hoping her outburst would drive him away and leave her to wallow in her mortification in peace. "My sister said I should make the first overtures to get to know them, so I thought I'd just...just...Oh, I don't know!" She tossed up her hands in frustration. "But I couldn't just stand there several yards away, looking like an utter bedlamite, now could I?"

Sympathy flickered deep in his eyes, now darkened by the fading purples and oranges of twilight until they resembled a winter's midnight. "I see."

No, she was certain he didn't. He was handsome and charming, and she doubted that he'd ever had any trouble at all approaching whatever woman caught his interest. A rake in training, indeed. While for herself, she could see the specter of spinsterhood lingering on the not-so-distant horizon.

She heaved out a sigh and shook her head. "I don't know the first thing about how to talk to men my own age," she explained, "and none of them pay any attention to me. If I fell through the ice, they'd not notice that I was gone."

"I seriously doubt that."

But Mariah knew it, and her eyes stung with fresh frustration. He must think her pathetic. "It's true," she whispered.

"Then let me give you a piece of advice." He stood, then turned to face her and held out his hand.

She stared suspiciously at him. "Why should I trust you?"

"Because I'm a rake-in-training." His eyes sparkled like the stars overhead. "And we would-be rakehells are always benevolent dispensers of invaluable information about men to innocent young ladies."

Recognizing that for the bamming it was, she heaved out a

long-suffering sigh but put her hand in his anyway to allow him to help her to her feet.

But once she was standing, he didn't let go of her hand. Instead, he covered it with both of his. He stood close enough to her that only a few inches of wintry air separated them. Her pulse spiked at his nearness. At the way he stared down at her. At the way her skin tingled with awareness when his gaze dropped to her mouth.

"And your advice?" she reminded him, her voice suddenly thick and trembling.

"Be yourself." His mouth poised so close to hers that she felt his warm breath tickle over her lips with each word. "How could any would-be rake resist?"

She froze at that flirtation, except for her heart, which pounded wildly in her ears like a drum.

"Mistletoe," he murmured.

She blinked at that wholly unexpected comment. "Pardon?"

He glanced up at the bunch of mistletoe hanging directly over their heads that someone had strung up as part of the decorations. Then he said with a smile, his gaze returning hungrily to her mouth, "No good rake-in-training would dare to snub tradition."

He meant...to *kiss* her?

Her head spun. There was nothing wrong with a little kiss, after all. Couples all over the fair were kissing beneath the mistletoe. It would only be an innocent kiss. Nothing more. And they were alone in the deepening twilight darkness, with no one to see...But a *kiss*!

Still she stared up at him in anticipation, while around them, the icy air crackled with electricity, and all of her throbbed with

nervous excitement.

Slowly, he lowered his head and touched his lips to hers, and her breath caught beneath his kiss. Not just any kiss. Her *very first* kiss. Mariah didn't dare let herself think about what it meant that such a handsome and charming university man was kissing her. That he *wanted* to kiss her. That he'd told her to simply be herself, that being herself was irresistible—

All she knew was how tender and gentle his kiss, how impossible that strong lips could be so soft. And so deliciously warm, especially when the wintry evening chilled her skin. How goose bumps rose across her skin, and a breathtaking tingle twined slowly down her spine, all the way down until her toes curled inside her boots. She closed her eyes to imprint this moment on her mind, to absorb every sensation that flooded her senses.

His mouth lifted from hers as he shifted back. But she didn't open her eyes, not wanting this encounter to end one heartbeat sooner than it had to. Oh, it was simply magical!

"Just be yourself," he repeated in a husky voice, taking the liberty of caressing his gloved thumb across her cheek. "And damn any man who's too blind to notice a blossoming beauty like you."

She felt him step away, felt the distance increase between them—

She opened her eyes and whispered, "Don't go."

But he was already several feet away and didn't hear her. He paused in his leaving only to call out over his shoulder, "Happy holidays." Even in the darkness, his sapphire eyes gleamed as he took one last glance at her before heading into the heart of the fair.

"But—but—" Once again words failed her when it came to

getting a man's attention, and she blurted out the only thing that came to her confused mind — "I don't even know your name!"

"Robert Carlisle," he called out with a grin.

Then he vanished into the crowd before she could give him her name, and he was immediately lost among the rows of vendors and the flurry of activity that only increased now that night had fallen.

She stared after him, long after he'd disappeared. Her heart didn't slow its pounding — instead, it simply soared! A warmth spread out from low in her belly, flaring out to the ends of her fingers and toes, and a happy laugh rose on her lips.

Her first kiss...*magical*.

She glanced down at the broach she still held in her hand, and despite her eyes blurring once more, although this time for a completely different reason, she could still see her mother's silhouette in the shadows. Just as she could still see the stars as she raised her eyes to gaze into the winter sky. Surely, somewhere amid the stars, her mother was watching down upon her from heaven.

And Mariah knew that she was smiling.

*Robert and Mariah's story continues  
on March 8<sup>th</sup> in AS THE DEVIL DARES*

<https://www.annaharringtonbooks.com/as-the-devil-dares>

*(Author's Note: Although the real 1814 frost fair took place in February,  
I moved it up to the holidays in late December in order for Mariah to  
have her first kiss  
beneath the mistletoe...unknowingly with the man who will later become  
her enemy, before finally claiming her heart.)*

