

*How THE
DUKE STOLE
CHRISTMAS*

A CAPTURING THE CARLISLES
SHORT STORY

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STOLE CHRISTMAS***

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by

Anna Harrington

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Miranda Hodgkins frowned as she glanced around the little parish church in Islingham.

Goodness, how grim the service was! One would have thought it marked a funeral instead of Twelfth Night. And oh, the poor orphans sitting in the stretch of pews with her—her heart broke for them. For nearly two years, they'd been looking forward to the Twelfth Night festivities for which the village had developed a wild reputation, due in no small part to the Carlisle brothers, who in recent years had taken celebrations to a level that surely made the bishops tremble. But for the second year in a row, and the first for the Carlisle family out of mourning for their late father, Richard Carlisle, there would be no celebration.

And *he* was to blame. Sebastian Carlisle, Duke of Trent, had ruined the Christmas holiday for everyone in the village, and especially for the orphans who had so little else to look forward to.

Her eyes narrowed on the man as he sat in his family's pew, his mother and brothers beside him. All of the Carlises had been through two terrible years, and she didn't begrudge them their grief. In fact, she'd done everything she could to help the duchess

through her mourning last year. But their formal mourning period had been over for nearly nine months, and Miranda now worried that the family's continued mourning would harmfully affect the villagers and tenants, who felt compelled to keep mourning right along with them. The dukedom was the village, and the village was the dukedom...

And the duke had canceled Christmas.

Or rather, he'd canceled Twelfth Night, the best part of the Christmastide season. Twelfth Night in Islingham Village used to be a full-out traditional ruckus...with drinking, songs, bonfires, games...the halls and parlors in all the village homes draped in greenery...the doors of Chestnut Hill thrown open wide and everyone in the village invited to the Carlisle's annual open house and festivities. But the duke's death last year had cast a pall over the village, and this year, once again, there were no celebrations. Christmastide had been a grim and sober affair, with religion and charity but no fun. A message came to the orphanage, for which the duke was the main patron, that the children were to go to church and enjoy a quiet Christmas dinner provided by the manor house, but that was all. No Twelfth Night.

Given that, what other choice did Miranda have but to take matters into her own hands?

"Amen," the congregation replied in unison, ending the service.

Everyone rose to their feet to shuffle from the church, including the dozen orphans who looked at her with such disappointment and sadness that her heart tugged for them. If there had been any doubt lingering inside her that her plans for this evening were a bad idea, seeing the glum looks on their faces vanished them all.

“Mr. Grundy!” Miranda darted through the crowd gathered in the nave to grab his arm. The man, who worked at the orphanage as a handyman, had become her accomplice in her plans. She lowered her voice. “Are we set for this evening?”

“Aye, miss.” He winked at her. “All set, just as ye planned. O’ course, I had to get help.”

Panic flashed through her. “Help?”

He nodded. “To get all the wood out to the cottage for the bonfire, along wit’ the tables an’ blankets, I had to ask Mr. Cooper to help. Had to borrow his wagon.”

“Oh.” She frowned. She hadn’t considered how to get everything for the party out to the old gamesman’s cottage in the woods, which hadn’t been used regularly for years and would provide the perfect place to hold a secret Twelfth Night party for the orphans. In the middle of the woods, no one from the village or the manor house would ever know about it. “Well...all right, as long as you don’t tell anyone else.”

“Yer secret’s safe with me, miss.”

“See you tonight.” She squeezed his hand. “And thank you, very much. Oh, the children are going to be so happy!”

She could barely contain her excitement over the secret festival she’d planned. It was going to be such grand fun! Of course, it wouldn’t be much in comparison to the wild spreads that the Carlisle brothers used to throw at Chestnut Hill. But even the small party she’d planned, with a few cakes and mugs of spiced wassail that the orphanage’s cook and housekeeper had agreed to make, would be enough to make the children happy. As far as Miranda was concerned, that was all that mattered.

In her enthusiasm, she bounced out of the church—

“Careful!”

And smacked into Sebastian Carlisle standing at the top of the church steps, chatting with the vicar. He grabbed her arm to keep both of them from tumbling down the steps and set her away from him with a irritated frown. She wasn't surprised. Lately, it seemed that the only expression that the duke wore was one of disapproval. Aimed directly at her.

"Miranda," he acknowledged tightly. He'd known her since she first came to live in Islingham with her aunt and uncle on one of the estate's tenant farms, and she and all the Carlisle children had played together in the nursery and gotten into all kinds of troublesome schemes together. Which was why an informality existed between them, despite his being a duke and her being the orphanage manageress.

"Sebastian," she returned, quickly putting a somber expression on her face so that he wouldn't suspect—

"You are up to something," he murmured to her in a low voice as he led her to the side of the steps to give them as much privacy as possible amidst the exiting parishioners.

"I am not." Oh, a bald-faced lie! Yet it was for the greater good, truly.

He clearly did not believe her. But then, he'd always had the ability to see right through her. A talent which could be downright annoying at times, especially when she was very much up to something of which he would not approve. Like tonight's party for the children. "With you, Miranda, there's always something to worry about. The mercantile fire, the flooding of the river, Mr. Latimer's chickens, Mrs. Cooper's roses—"

"All unintentional accidents," she interrupted with an annoyed glower at him. Was it her fault if trouble somehow always found her, even when she was only trying to help the

villagers and the people she loved? But *not* tonight. Tonight's party had been carefully thought out, right down to the last detail, and all would go exactly as planned. For once. "Why do you assume the worst?"

"Because I know you," he answered honestly, which earned him a deep scowl from her. He repeated pointedly, "The mercantile fire, the river, Mr. Latimer's chickens, Mrs. Cooper's roses—"

"All right, all right." *Good heavens*, he made her sound like the four horsemen of the apocalypse! "I'll admit that in the past I've been a bit..."

He crooked a brow. "Reckless?"

"Overly enthusiastic," she corrected with a peeved sniff. "But not anymore." Being responsible for running the orphanage and overseeing the children's care had certainly matured her, even if all the Carlises continued to think of her as nothing more than the girl in braids who practically lived in their nursery growing up.

The flicker in his sapphire eyes told her that he didn't believe her. "Just be careful, Miranda," he said quietly, concern lacing his deep voice. "My family cares about you. We've lost enough people we love during the past few years. We don't want to lose any more."

Her throat tightened with grief for him and his family. Glancing past him to Elizabeth Carlisle, who still wore all black for her late husband, she gave a reassuring squeeze to his arm. "How is your mother?"

He breathed out a deep breath. "She's strong, but it's still one day at a time for her. For all of us."

She nodded sympathetically. Richard Carlisle had been one of the finest men in England, devoted to his family and deeply in love with his wife. The family—and all of the village, for that matter—still felt his absence with a heartrending intensity. “Perhaps...it would do her good if everyone came out of mourning now,” she said gently, her voice soft on the crisp January air. “If the village and estate returned to doing as we used to.” She took a deep breath and jumped off the cliff—“Such as celebrating Twelfth Night.”

He turned to follow her gaze to his mother, and his eyes darkened with concern. “She isn’t ready yet for that.”

“Nothing too wild, of course. But to hear everyone singing and laughing...surely that would lift her spirits.” She paused pointedly. “And the spirits of the orphans, too.”

Shaking his head, he repeated, “She isn’t ready yet.”

Then Sebastian’s gaze fell onto Miranda, and he searched her face, as if hunting for answers in her countenance. Her chest tightened, because she had nothing to offer that would ease his sorrow. She knew the desolation and anguish of losing one’s parents, and nothing could heal those wounds except for time and acceptance.

“Soon, Sebastian,” she whispered the warning and slid her hand down his arm to briefly lace her fingers through his and give his hand a reassuring squeeze. “It has to be soon, or she might never...”

She might never heal.

He nodded and looked away, but not before she saw the glistening in his eyes.

Mumbling her goodbyes, and this time going with much less enthusiasm, Miranda walked down the steps and along High

Street toward the orphanage, the children all following behind in their new coats and shoes that the Carlisle family had given to them on Boxing Day. She frowned. She was worried about the Carlises and about Elizabeth Carlisle most of all. Oh, Sebastian dearly loved his mother and surely thought he was acting in her best interests by canceling Twelfth Night and eliminating yet another reminder of the family's loss, but Miranda knew better. What the duchess needed more than anything *was* a reminder of her husband, and not just any reminder but one of how happy a man he was, how he loved to laugh and dance, and how much joy he brought to those around them. A reminder in his death of how well he'd lived his *life*.

The orphans weren't the only ones in need of holiday tradition during this Christmastide. She only hoped the duke realized that before it was too late.

"Be careful on the path here," Miranda warned the children following behind her through the dark woods.

The sun had set over two hours ago, and the only light in the black woods came from the little candle lantern she held up in front of her. But with each step as they wound their way closer to the old cottage, her excitement rose until her heart pounded with the thrill of being able to give the children this special night. Oh, it wasn't much...a small fire with cakes and wassail, some songs, a few stories...and then they'd be back in the village and tucked into their beds in the dormitory rooms by the time the bell in the

parish church struck ten o'clock. But it would be enough to make them happy.

As they neared the cottage, she saw the glow from the fire. Mr. Gundy would be there waiting for them, with the fire already burning to welcome them from the darkness. So would the home's cook and housekeeper, who had brought the refreshments—

Miranda stopped at the edge of the clearing and stared. Then blinked in panicked disbelief. That wasn't Mr. Gundy she saw in the firelight.

It was the entire village.

"Oh no," she groaned, her heart sinking with dread.

Not a small fire but a giant bonfire comprised of entire felled trees lit up the surrounding woods, and flames leapt high into the night sky. Around it, villagers gathered in groups, all of them singing and dancing and drinking...lots of drinking apparently, based on the ale barrels and wine casks sitting near the cottage door. Long tables were covered with all kinds of delicious meats, sugared fruits, breads, and a rounded heap of the traditional little Twelfth Night cakes, divided into two piles of one for the men and the other for the women. A large pot of wassail warmed over a smaller fire and was ladled out generously in metal tankards and stoneware mugs. Laughter rose over all of it, nearly drowning out the singing and only adding to the villagers' joy.

When the orphans saw the party, they all let out a cheer and rushed past Miranda to run down to the fire and join in with the merriment.

Oh no no no no no no no.... "Come back here!"

But not one of the children listened as they quickly became swept up into the party that had already gotten out of control.

Biting her lip, and hating that Sebastian was right about trouble always finding her, she hurried after them. She would find all the children and march them back to the village straight away. Oh, the duke was certain to scold her for this! Or worse. If he learned that she'd brought the children here, as the home's main patron he might very well rescind her position and replace her with a new manageress. Her eyes stung at the thought. These children and that home meant the world to her. She simply could *not* let that happen!

But chasing down the children proved impossible amid the boisterous crowd and festivities. When they saw her coming, they simply dashed away into the shadows of the woods or joined in with one of the groups of revelers, and those she did manage to catch refused to wait at the side of the clearing for her to gather the others. Some of the older boys simply flat out refused to listen at all. Hot tears of frustration gathered at her lashes. Oh, this was not at all how she wanted this evening to go!

"Mr. Grundy." She found the handyman amid a group of villagers who'd begun to sing out a Christmastide song, only for it to turn into an Irish drinking song. "What is happening here?"

Grinning at her, he pulled deferentially at his cap in greeting. "Twelfth Night! Just as ye wanted."

"This is *not* what I wanted!" But it was Twelfth Night, though. Or at least, the kind of Twelfth Night she'd heard about in the stories about the celebrations the Carlisle boys had thrown through the years. *Oh dear heavens*—someone had lit a bowl on fire for snapdragons! She pulled Mr. Grundy aside and waved away the mug of wassail he offered her. "No one else was supposed to know of our plans. The entire village is here!"

“Aye.” He had the good grace to look sheepish as he admitted, “I needed Mr. Cooper’s help haulin’ the logs for the fire, an’ he suggested we make it bigger...like we used to in the old days. A big fire. An’ then he told his wife, who came up wit’ the idea of the cakes, they bein’ tradition and all.”

“And all the wine and spirits?” If Sebastian saw the orphans near that—oh, it would be the end of her!

“I reckon more people must’ve found out.”

Judging by the number of people gathered in the clearing, she reckoned the entire village and countryside from here to Lincoln had found out.

She groaned and pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. Maybe the Carlisles would never find out about tonight, maybe the village could keep secret—

“What the devil is going on here?” A loud and angry voice called out above the din of the party.

Miranda winced. *Sebastian.*

Around her, the party fell still and silent, the singers stopping in mid-song and the laughter dying away. The crowd parted as the groups of villagers turned and stepped back to reveal the Duke of Trent standing at the edge of the clearing, with his mother on his arm and his two brothers standing just behind them. The dancing flames of the bonfire lit their faces and showed the bewildered anger of the duke, the stunned grins of Robert and Quinton, and on their mother’s face...wide-eyed surprise.

“Your Graces.” Mr. Gundy stepped forward and nodded to Sebastian and then to his mother. “Happy Twelfth Night to you an’ yours.”

Sebastian’s brows snapped together as he began to say something, only for his mother to lay her hand on his arm and

interrupt, "Thank you," she answered softly, although uncertainty sounded in her voice. "And to all of you, as well. May I ask...what are you celebrating?"

"The holiday, Your Grace." Mr. Grundy politely removed his hat. "Just like we used to."

"Whose idea was this?" Sebastian demanded.

"All of ours, sir."

The duke's eyes slid knowingly to Miranda. Oh, she wanted to die! "All of yours?"

"Aye, sir," he answered, not giving her up.

Miranda could have happily kissed the weathered old handyman for that!

"Your father was a good man, sir, a kind man," Mr. Grundy continued. "He always said that a man should work hard when work is needin' to be done an' to enjoy himself just as hard when the work be done."

Elizabeth Carlisle nodded. In the light of the bonfire, Miranda could see the tears glistening in her eyes at the mention of the late duke, just as she could see the stiffening in Sebastian as he stood beside her.

"Yes." The duchess smiled sadly, and a melancholy but affectionate expression lit her face. "My Richard always did say that." She squeezed Sebastian's arm, then said in a louder, more clear voice, "And he would be so happy to know that you are all doing just that. He loved you all so very much."

"And we him, my lady," Mr. Grundy reassured her quietly. "May we continue on tonight in his memory?"

The man's quiet words choked her visibly with emotion. All she could do was nod and smile, unable to speak.

As if sensing that the moment had come for him to carry on the traditions in his father's footsteps, Sebastian grabbed a mug of wassail from the nearby table and raised it into the air.

"To Islingham Village and all the good men and women who live there," he toasted. "A happy Twelfth Night and Epiphany to all of you. And may the oncoming year bring happiness, prosperity, and peace." His gaze settled on Miranda, and her chest warmed happily for him and his family, that tonight they could finally begin to emerge from their mourning and move on with their lives the way Richard Carlisle would have wanted for them. "To you and the ones you love."

"Hear, hear!" Cheers went up from the crowd, and as Sebastian lowered the tankard to take a swallow of the wassail, the musicians struck up their instruments again, followed by singing and dancing and playing of games, until the entire village was once more caught up in the revelries.

Soft snowflakes began to fall from the dark winter sky overhead. By morning, the countryside would be covered in a thin blanket of snow, but tonight, no one cared. All that mattered was being together with the ones they loved on this most traditional, most special night of the year.

From behind her, an arm reached around her to hold out one of the little cakes. "For you."

Miranda smiled and accepted it. "Thank you, Sebastian."

She turned to face him and froze in her steps, the expression of gratitude and relief on his handsome face stealing her breath away. His blue eyes shined as dark as midnight.

"Thank *you*, Miranda," he murmured, the soft sound of his deep voice twining down her spine. Then he lifted his gaze to

look past her at his mother as she joined in with the group of women singing carols around the wassail pot. "For everything."

"For once, this wasn't my doing," she admitted a bit sheepishly as she broke the cake in two and took a bite. "I had no control—oh!"

She laughed as she found the hard pea baked into her cake. Apparently, the villagers had remembered every Twelfth Night tradition, right down to this one. The man and woman who found the bean and pea were declared the king and queen of the night's festival and expected to kiss, to bring in the near year with love and luck. She held up the pea, and a cheer went out from the crowd. One of the women rushed forward to place a crown of ivy on her head.

"And what man has its mate?" Elizabeth Carlisle called out, a look of happiness on her face brighter than Miranda had seen in nearly two years.

When none of the gentleman came forward with the bean to claim his kiss from Miranda, the villagers returned to their party and carried on, certain that one of the men would find the lucky bean in his cake before the night ended and claim his crown and his kiss.

She turned back to Sebastian, whose lips twisted as his eyes found hers. He said nothing, but the gleam in his eyes gave him away.

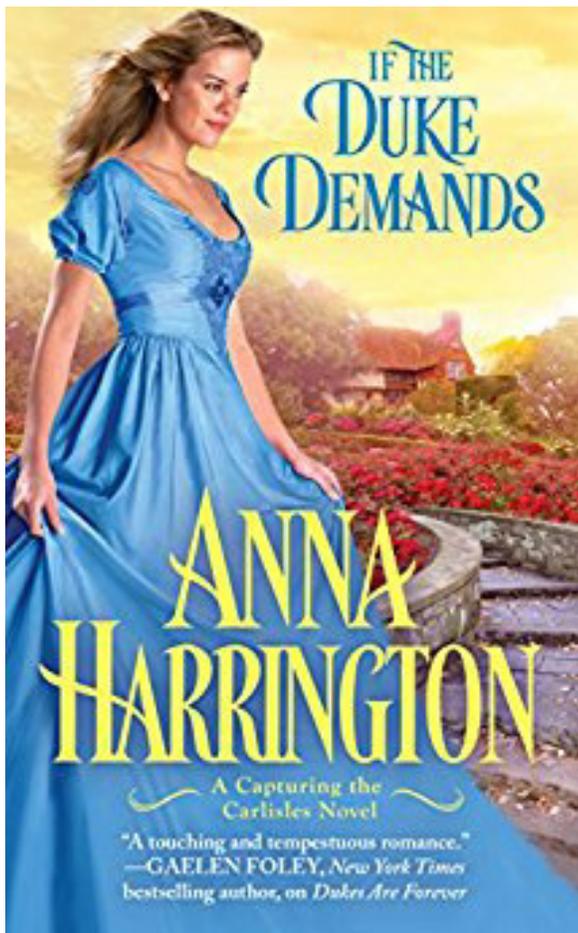
"It's you, isn't it?" she whispered, staring up at him and feeling her heart inexplicably start to pound. "You found the bean—you're the king for the night. Aren't you going to tell them?"

He shook his head and gave a long sigh. "Being a duke is hard enough. Who in his right mind would ever want to be

king?" Then he leaned forward and placed a kiss on her cheek, slipping the bean into her hand without anyone seeing. "Happy Twelfth Night, Miranda."

As she watched him walk away, she placed her hand against her cheek where he'd kissed her. "Happy Twelfth Night to you, too, Sebastian," she whispered. She closed her other hand around the bean and pressed her fist against her heart. "And may you find love in the new year."

The End



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continues
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Anna Harrington fell in love with historical romances—and all those dashing Regency heroes—while living in London, where she studied literature and theatre. She loves to travel, fly airplanes, and hike, and when she isn't busy writing her next novel, she loves fussing over her roses in her garden. Visit her website at

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