Simply Unforgettable

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Extract

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I

It never snowed for Christmas. It always snowed—if it snowed at all—before Christmas, when people were trying to travel to family gatherings or house parties, or long after Christmas, when it was a mere nuisance to people trying to go about the business of their everyday lives. It never snowed actually *on* Christmas, when it would have added a picturesque quality and some magic to the celebrations.

Such was the sad reality of living in England.

This year had been no exception. The skies had remained stubbornly gray and heavy with the promise of something dire all over the holiday, and the weather had been chilly and blustery and really not very pleasant at all. But the ground had remained obstinately bare and as drab as the sky.

It had been a rather dreary Christmas, if the truth were told.

Frances Allard, who had made the long day's journey from Bath, where she taught at Miss Martin's School for Girls on Sutton and Daniel streets, in order to spend the holiday with her two great-aunts near the village of Mickledean in Somersetshire, had looked forward to being in rural surroundings. She had dreamed of taking long walks in the crisp winter countryside, blue skies overhead, or else of wading to church and the Assembly Rooms through a soft white fall of snow.

But the wind and the cold devoid of sunshine had forced her to curtail the few walks she had undertaken, and the Assembly Rooms had remained firmly closed, everyone having been content, it seemed,

to spend Christmas with family and friends this year rather than with all their neighbors at a communal party or ball.

Frances would have been lying to herself if she had not admitted to feeling just a little disappointment.

Miss Gertrude Driscoll and her widowed sister, Mrs. Martha Melford, Frances's great-aunts, who lived at the dower house in the park of Wimford Grange, had been invited to join Baron Clifton's family at the big house on Christmas Day, the baron being their great-nephew and therefore a cousin of some remove to Frances. Frances had been invited too, of course. They had also all been invited to a few other private parties in the neighborhood. But the great-aunts had sent back polite refusals to them all, declaring themselves too cozy in their own house to venture outdoors in such inclement weather and too contented with the coveted company of their great-niece to bother with any invitations. They could, after all, visit their great-nephew and his family and their neighbors any day of the year. Besides, Great-Aunt Gertrude had fancied that she was coming down with something, though she had displayed no clearly discernible symptoms, and dared not stray too far from the fireside of her own home.

Frances's wishes had not been consulted.

Only when the holiday was over and they were hugging her and shedding a few tears over her and kissing her good-bye before she stepped up into their rather rickety private carriage, which they had insisted upon sending with her though it did not usually venture beyond a five-mile radius around the village, did it occur to her great-aunts that maybe they had been selfish in remaining at home all over the holiday and ought to have remembered that dear Frances was only three-and-twenty and would perhaps have enjoyed a party or two and the company of other young people to enliven the tedium of a Christmas spent entirely with two old ladies.

She had hugged them in return and shed a few tears of her own and assured them—almost truthfully—that they were all she had needed to make Christmas a wondrously happy occasion after a long term at school, though actually it had been more than one term. She had remained at the school all through last summer, since Miss Martin

took in charity girls and it was always necessary to provide for their care and entertainment through the various holidays—and Frances had had nowhere particular to go at the time.

Christmas had, then, been a disappointingly dull holiday. But she really had enjoyed the quiet after the constantly busy bustle of school life. And she was extremely fond of her great-aunts, who had opened their arms and their hearts to her from the moment of her arrival in England as a motherless baby with a French émigré father who had been fleeing the Reign of Terror. She had no memory of that time, of course, but she knew that the aunts would have brought her into the country to live with them if Papa had chosen to let her go. But he had not. He had kept her with him in London, surrounding her with nurses and governesses and singing masters, and lavishing upon her all that money could buy for her comfort and pleasure—and oceans of love besides. She had had a happy, privileged, secure childhood and girlhood—until her father's sudden death when she was only eighteen.

But her aunts had had some role to play in her growing years. They had brought her into the country for holidays and had occasionally gone to London to take her about and buy her gifts and feed her ices and other treats. And ever since she had learned to read and write she had exchanged monthly letters with them. She was inordinately fond of them. It really had been lovely to spend Christmas in their company.

There had been no snow to enliven her Christmas, then.

There *was* snow, however—and plenty of it—soon after.

It began when the carriage was no more than eight or ten miles from Mickledean, and Frances did consider knocking on the roof panel and suggesting to the elderly coachman that they turn around and go back. But it was not a heavy snow, and she did not really want to delay her journey. It looked more like a white rain for all of the hour after it began. But inevitably—when it really was too late to turn back—the flakes became larger and thicker, and in an alarmingly short time the countryside, which had been looking as if it were rimed with heavy frost rather than with snow itself, began to disappear under a thickening blanket of white.

The carriage moved steadily onward, and Frances assured herself that it was foolish to be nervous, that the road was probably perfectly safe for travel, especially at the plodding speed to which Thomas was keeping the horses. Soon the snow would stop falling and begin to melt, as was always the way with snow in England.

She concentrated her thoughts on the term ahead, planning which pieces of music she would choose for the senior madrigal choir to sing. Something bright and brilliant and Elizabethan, she thought. She wondered if she dared choose something in five parts. The girls had mastered three-part singing and were doing rather well at four-part pieces, though they did sometimes break off in the middle of a phrase to collapse in laughter as they got hopelessly entangled in complex harmonies.

Frances smiled at the thought. She usually laughed with them. It was better—and ultimately more productive—than weeping.

Maybe they would *try* five parts.

Within another half hour, it was no longer possible to see anything but unrelieved white in any direction—and no longer possible to concentrate upon thoughts of school or anything else. And the snow was still falling so thickly that it dazzled the eyes and made it hard to see any great distance from the windows even if there had been anything to see. When she pressed the side of her face against the glass in order to look ahead, she could not even distinguish the road from the ditches or the fields beyond. And there did not even seem to be any hedgerows on this particular stretch that might have provided some sort of dark border to signify where the road was.

Panic clawed at her stomach.

Could Thomas see the road from his higher perch on the box? But the snow must be blowing into his eyes and half blinding him. And he must be twice as cold as she was. She pressed her hands deeper into the fur muff that Great-Aunt Martha had given her for Christmas. She would pay a fortune for a hot cup of tea, she thought.

So much for wishing for snow. What sage was it who had once said that one should beware of what one wished for lest the wish be granted?

She sat back in her seat, determined to trust Thomas to find the

way. After all, he had been her great-aunts' coachman forever and ever, or at least for as far back as she could remember, and she had never heard of his being involved in any sort of accident. But she thought wistfully of the cozy dower house she had left behind and of the bustling school that was her destination. Claudia Martin would be expecting her today. Anne Jewell and Susanna Osbourne, the other resident teachers, would be watching for her arrival. They would all spend the evening together in Claudia's private sitting room, seated cozily about the fire, drinking tea and exchanging reminiscences of Christmas. She would be able to give them a graphic account of the snowstorm through which she had traveled. She would embellish it and exaggerate the danger and her fears and have them all laughing.

But she was not laughing yet.

And suddenly laughter was as far from her thoughts as flying to the moon would be. The carriage slowed and rocked and slithered, and Frances jerked one hand free of her muff and grabbed for the worn leather strap above her head, convinced that they were about to tip right over at any moment. She waited to see her life flash before her eyes, and mumbled the opening words of the Lord's Prayer rather than scream and startle Thomas into losing the last vestiges of his control. The sound of the horses' hooves seemed deafening even though they were moving over snow and should have been silent. Thomas was shouting enough for ten men.

And then, looking out through the window nearest her rather than clench her eyes tightly shut and not even see the end approaching, she actually *saw* the horses, and instead of being up ahead pulling the carriage, they were drawing alongside her window and then forging ahead.

She gripped the strap even more tightly and leaned forward. Those were not *her* horses. Gracious heaven, someone was *overtaking* them—in *these* weather conditions.

The box of the overtaking carriage came into view with its coachman looking rather like a hunchbacked snowman bent over the ribbons and spewing hot abuse from his mouth—presumably at poor Thomas.

And then the carriage passed in a flash of blue, and Frances had the merest glimpse of a gentleman with many capes to his greatcoat and a tall beaver hat on his head. He looked back at her with one eyebrow cocked and an expression of supercilious contempt on his face.

He dared to be contemptuous of *her*?

Within moments the blue carriage was past, her own rocked and slithered some more, and then it appeared to right itself before continuing on its slow, plodding way.

Frances's fears were replaced by a hot fury. She seethed with it. Of all the reckless, inconsiderate, suicidal, homicidal, dangerous, *stupid* things to do! Goodness gracious, even if she pressed her nose to the window she could not see more than five yards distant, and the falling snow hampered vision even within that five yards. Yet that hunchbacked, foul-mouthed coachman and that contemptuous gentleman with his arrogant eyebrow were in such a hurry that they would endanger life and limb—her own and Thomas's as well as their own—in order to *overtake*?

But now that the excitement was over, she was suddenly aware again of being all alone in an ocean of whiteness. She felt panic contract her stomach muscles once more and sat back, deliberately letting go of the strap and folding her hands neatly inside her muff again. Panic would get her nowhere. It was altogether more probable that Thomas would get her somewhere.

Poor Thomas. He would be ready for something hot to drink—or more probably something strong *and* hot—when they arrived at that somewhere. He was by no means a young man.

With the fingers of her right hand she picked out the melody of a William Byrd madrigal on the back of her left hand, as if it were the keyboard of a pianoforte. She hummed the tune aloud.

And then she could feel the carriage rocking and slithering again and grasped for the strap once more. She looked out and ahead, not really expecting to see anything, but actually she could see a dark shape, which appeared to be blocking the way ahead. In one glimpse of near-clarity between snowflakes she saw that it was a carriage and horses. She even thought it might be a blue carriage.

But though the horses pulling her own had drawn to a halt, the carriage itself did not immediately follow suit. It swayed slightly to the left, righted itself, and then slithered more than slightly to the right—and this time it kept going until it reached what must have been the edge of the road, where one wheel caught on something. The conveyance performed a neat half-pirouette and slid gently backward and downward until its back wheels were nestled deep in a snowbank.

Frances, tipped backward and staring at the opposite seat, which was suddenly half above her, could see nothing but solid snow out of the windows on both sides.

And if this was not the outside of enough, she thought with ominous calm, then she did not know what was.

She was aware of a great clamor from somewhere—horses snorting and whinnying, men shouting.

Before she could collect herself sufficiently to extricate herself from her snowy cocoon, the door opened from the outside—not without some considerable assistance from male muscles and shocking male profanities—and an arm and hand clad in a thick and expensive great-coat and a fine leather glove reached inside to assist her. It was obvious to her that the arm did not belong to Thomas. Neither did the face at the end of it—hazel-eyed, square-jawed, irritated, and frowning.

It was a face Frances had seen briefly less than ten minutes ago.

It was a face—and a person—against whom she had conceived a considerable hostility.

She slapped her hand onto his without a word, intending to use it to assist herself to alight with as much dignity as she could muster. But he hoisted her out from her awkward position as if she were a sack of meal and deposited her on the road, where her half-boots immediately sank out of sight beneath several inches of snow. She could feel all the ferocity of the cold wind and the full onslaught of the snow falling from the sky.

One was supposed to see red when one was furious. But she saw only white.

"You, sir," she said above the noise of the horses and of Thomas and the hunchbacked snowman exchanging vigorous and colorful

abuse of each other, "deserve to be hanged, drawn, and quartered. You deserve to be flayed alive. You deserve to be boiled in oil."

The eyebrow that had already offended her once rose again. So did the other.

"And you, ma'am," he said in clipped tones that matched the expression on his face, "deserve to be locked up in a dark dungeon as a public nuisance for venturing out onto the king's highway in such an old boat. It is a veritable fossil. Any museum would reject it as far too ancient a vehicle to be of any interest to its clientele."

"And its age and the caution of my driver give you the right to endanger several lives by overtaking it in such appalling conditions?" she asked rhetorically, toe to toe with him though none of their toes were visible above the snow. "Perhaps, sir, someone ought to relate to you the story of the tortoise and the hare."

"Meaning?" He dropped both eyebrows and then cocked just the original one.

"Your reckless speed has brought you to grief," she said, jabbing a finger in the direction of the blue carriage, which completely blocked the road ahead—though it did appear to be *on* the road, she saw when she looked directly at it. "You are no farther ahead after all."

"If you will use your eyes for looking instead of just flashing fire and brimstone, ma'am," he said, "you will see that we have come to a bend in the road, and that my coachman—and I too until I was interrupted by your coachman's ineptitude in drawing from a crawl to a complete halt—is clearing a drift of snow so that my hare may proceed on its way. Your tortoise, on the other hand, is deep in a snowdrift and will be going nowhere for some time to come. Certainly not today."

She looked over her shoulder. It was suddenly, sickeningly obvious that he was right. Only the front part of the carriage was even visible, and that was pointing half at the sky.

"And so who is likely to win the race?" he asked her.

What on earth was she going to *do*? Her feet were wet, her cloak was matted with snow about the hem, she was being heavily snowed upon, she was cold, and she was miserable. She was also frightened.

And furious.

"And whose fault is all this?" she asked him. "If *you* had not been springing your horses, *we* would not now be in a snowbank."

"Springing the horses." He looked at her with incredulity mingled with contempt and called over his shoulder. "Peters! I have it on expert authority that you were springing the horses when we overtook this ancient relic. I have told and told you not to spring the horses during a snowstorm. You are dismissed."

"Give me a moment to finish digging through this drift, guv, and I'll walk off into the sunset," the coachman called back. "If someone will just tell me which direction that is."

"You had better not do it anyway," the gentleman said. "I would have to drive the carriage myself. You are rehired."

"I'll think about it, guv," the coachman called. "There! That about does it."

Thomas meanwhile was busy releasing the horses from their useless burden.

"If your carriage had been moving at any speed above an almost imperceptible crawl, ma'am," the gentleman said, turning his attention back to Frances, "it would not have posed a reckless endangerment to serious, responsible travelers who would really prefer to get somewhere by the end of a day instead of spending eternity on one stretch of road."

Frances glared at him. She would bet a month's salary that not one whisper of cold could penetrate that greatcoat he wore, with its dozen capes, or that one speck of snow had found its way down inside his top boots.

"Ready to move on, then, guv," his coachman called, "unless you prefer to stand admiring the scenery for the next hour or so."

"Where is your maid?" The gentleman's eyes narrowed.

"I have none," she said. "That should be perfectly obvious. I am alone."

She was aware of his eyes sweeping over her from head to foot—or to just below the knee anyway. She was dressed in clothes that were perfectly good and serviceable for her return to school, though it

would be quite obvious to such a fashionable gentleman, of course, that they were neither expensive nor modish. She glared back at him.

"You are going to have to come along with me," he said ungraciously.

"I most certainly will not!"

"Very well, then," he said, turning away, "you may remain here in virtuous isolation."

She looked about her, and this time panic assaulted her knees as well as her stomach, and she almost sank into the snow never to be heard from again.

"Where are we?" she asked. "Do you have any idea?"

"Somewhere in Somersetshire," he said. "Apart from that I have not the foggiest notion, but most roads, I have learned from past experience, lead *somewhere* eventually. This is your last chance, ma'am. Do you wish to explore the great unknown in my fiendish company, or would you prefer to perish alone here?"

It irked her beyond words that really she had no choice.

The two coachmen were exchanging words again, she was aware—none too gentle words either.

"Take an hour or two in which to decide," the gentleman said with heavy irony, cocking that eyebrow again. "I am in no hurry."

"What about Thomas?" she asked.

"Thomas being the man in the moon?" he asked. "Or your coachman, perhaps? He will bring the horses and follow us."

"Very well, then," she said, glowering at him and then pressing her lips together.

He strode ahead of her to the blue carriage, sending up showers of snow as he went. Frances picked her way more cautiously after him, trying to set her feet in the ruts made by the wheels.

What a coil this was!

He offered his hand again to help her up into the carriage. It was a wonderfully new carriage, she saw resentfully, with plush upholstered seats. As soon as she sat on one of them she sank into it and realized that it would offer marvelous comfort even through a long journey. It also felt almost warm in contrast with the raw elements outside.

"There are two bricks on the floor, both of them still somewhat warm," the gentleman told her from the doorway. "Set your feet on one of them and cover yourself with one of the lap robes. I will see about having your belongings transferred from your carriage to mine."

The words themselves might have seemed both kind and considerate. But his clipped tone belied that possible impression, as did the firmness with which he slammed the door shut. Frances nevertheless did as he had suggested. Her teeth were literally chattering. Her fingers might have felt as if they were about to fall off if she could just feel them at all—she had abandoned her muff inside her own carriage.

How long was she going to have to endure this insufferable situation? she wondered. She was not in the habit of hating or even disliking people on sight. But the thought of spending even half an hour in close company with that arrogant, bad-tempered, sneering, contemptuous gentleman was singularly unappealing. Just the thought of him made her bristle.

Would she be able to find some other mode of travel from the first village they came to? A stagecoach, perhaps? But even as the thought flashed through her mind, she realized the absurdity of it. They would be fortunate to reach any village. Was she expecting that if they did, there would be no trace of snow there?

She was going to be stranded somewhere overnight—without any female companion and without a great deal of money since she had refused what her great-aunts had tried to press upon her. She would be fortunate if that somewhere did not turn out to be this carriage.

The very thought was enough to make her gasp for air.

But it was a distinct possibility. It had seemed to her eyes just a couple of minutes ago that the road was all but invisible.

She countered panic this time by setting her feet neatly side by side on the slightly warm brick and clasping her hands loosely in her lap.

She would trust to the skills of the strange, impertinent Peters, who had turned out not to be hunchbacked after all.

Now *this* would be an adventure with which to regale her friends when she finally reached Bath, she thought. Perhaps if she looked

more closely at him, the gentleman would even turn out to be describable as tall, dark, and handsome—the proverbial knight in shining armor, in fact. *That* would have Susanna's eyes popping out of her head and Anne's eyes softening with a romantic glow. And it would have Claudia pursing her lips and looking suspicious.

But, oh, dear, it was going to be hard to find any humor or any romance in this situation, even when she looked back on it from the safety of the school.