



CLARE
REVELL



Battle of the Flowers

DO ROSE BUSHES HAVE THORNS,
OR DO THORN BUSHES HAVE ROSES?

Battle of the Flowers

Clare Revell

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Dedication

For Mum and Dad. Thank you for everything.
Without you and your encouragement, I
wouldn't still be writing today.

Grateful thanks to Andy Jones, South East
Regional Editor for Global Radio, for his
technical help with my radio station and
outside broadcast sections.

What People are Saying

Times Arrow

I stand in awe of Revell's ability to pack an entire novel's worth of action and emotion into so few pages.

~ Delia Latham

Monday's Child

The blend of romance and suspense is superb, and the depth of emotion is so very touching. I am eagerly looking forward to the rest of the books in this series. Clare Revell is truly a master novelist. What a treat! I highly recommend *Monday's Child* to anyone looking for a GREAT story.

~ Mary Manners

Tuesday's Child

Ms. Revell has a marvelous touch with heroes. I love it! She also knows how to keep you on the edge of your seat! This is certainly turning out to be a great series! I can't wait for the next one!

~ Donna B Snow

1

For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth. ~ Song of Solomon 2:11-12

The lunch rush at the Three-Sixteen café, set on Headley Cross High Street, had been manic. However, it was finally over, for which Lia Wilder was eternally grateful. Mondays were always busy, but this was way worse than normal.

She raised the cup to her face and inhaled deeply, the scent of the hot and spicy gingerbread coffee filling her senses. Her feet had disowned the rest of her body an hour ago, with her ankles and knees threatening to join them very soon. With her hands wrapped around the mug, she eased back against the shelving unit, enjoying the warm splash of summer sunlight that poured through the individual panes of the leaded, squared windows.

Overhead the ceiling fan spun and hummed. The door stood open, the warm

breeze flooding in from outside, along with the sounds and chatter of the passing pedestrians.

As tired as she was, and as much as her job as a barista terrified her at times, she wouldn't change it for the world. Well, unless a job working from home, with communication solely by email cropped up, in which case she'd be there in a heartbeat.

She wriggled her toes and listened to the Christian radio station playing in the background. Any minute now *his* show would start. Excited anticipation sent her stomach diving headlong to her shoes. Her breath caught, and her heart started to pound so fast inside her aching chest, she feared she was going to drop dead on the spot.

The news finished and the jingle began playing. *His* jingle began to play.

"3.16 FM. The Jordan Tanner Show."

Lia's heart rate increased, and she wiped her damp palms on her apron as her tongue ran over her dry lips. She didn't know this man, yet the mere sound of his voice reduced her to a quivering wreck. How crazy was that?

She'd fallen in love with the sound of his voice.

This is ridiculous. If anyone knew how you felt you'd be laughed down the High Street. And if

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they still had stocks they'd put you in them and pelt you with rotten tomatoes and cold eggs and chips. And that would be a fate way worse than death. Everyone would look at you and laugh. You'd be the center of attention and gossip.

The whole idea of falling in love with someone's voice was more than crazy. It was unthinkable. Her brother would declare her certifiable and threaten to lock her up. But as long as she had a radio and her Bible, that would be fine with her. No more crowds or strangers to worry about or scare her. Just her, God, and the voice of the man she'd never met.

"Good afternoon, folks. It's five past two, the sun is shining, it's a beautiful day, and this is Jordan Tanner on 3.16FM. You've got the dubious pleasure of my company for the next three hours. This afternoon we're going to be talking about the upcoming Battle of the Flowers parade, and the impact the new car parking charges are having on local businesses. If you have views on either of those topics, or if there is something else you want to talk about, give me a call. The number is 01187 316 316."

"I could think of a few things to discuss," Lia told the radio.

Paula Jackson, her boss, laughed. "I bet you could. Grab another coffee and a cake and take five. I need a quick staff meeting

while it's quiet in here."

"All right, I'll be right there." Lia pushed away from the shelving unit as the first song started playing. "Love this one." Her feet tapped along to the Christian song as she poured another mug of gingerbread coffee and grabbed a pastry from the cabinet. "Still think it's cute that this place and the radio station have the same name."

Paula grinned. "You'd think anything to do with Jordan Tanner was cute. Including him."

Her cheeks burned, and Lia shook her head. "Don't know what you're talking about. 'Sides, he's probably married with six kids." She paused. "Or he's old enough to be my father. Or maybe both."

"You can't tell that just from his voice."

Lia set her cup and plate on the table and sat opposite her boss. "True."

"And I happen to know he's not married," Paula continued.

Lia wasn't going to ask *how* her boss knew that.

Paula seemed to know an awful lot about everything to do with the radio station. She must know someone who worked there.

"But I bet he doesn't look anything like I fancy he does." Heat filled her cheeks. *OK, that is so the wrong word to use.*

Paula smirked.

Lia knew Paula had caught her faux pas and wasn't going to let it slide. "What?" she asked as innocently as she could.

"I suppose you think he's tall, dark, and handsome?"

"No..." She shifted in her seat. "With that voice, I'd say blond, blue eyes, suave, sophisticated, and dashing." She paused. "And about your height, maybe a little taller."

"I see you've given this a lot of thought. Anyway, going back to the original topic before we get any more sidetracked than we have, I imagine both the café and the radio station have the same name for the same reason. John chapter three, verse sixteen."

"That's one of my favorite verses. 'For God so loved the world that He gave His One and Only Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.'"

Danni Summers, the other full-time barista, plumped down at the table. "One of mine, too. Which is why I love my uniform quite as much as I do. I'm planning on wearing it once the maternity leave starts. Keith reckons I'm mad."

Lia glanced down at her navy blue work t-shirt. Written on the front in white lettering under the café logo was a large 'Three-

Sixteen' and on the back of the shirt was written, 'Know what I mean, John?' She ran her fingers over the logo. "Who'd have thought a Christian café would be as popular as this one's turned out to be?"

Trevor Jackson, Paula's husband and the chef, eased into the chair next to her. "And to think the church dallied and procrastinated over the idea when Pastor Jack first suggested the church buy the shop and run it. But it's amazing what God has done here. Good home cooking, pleasant service, and a gospel outreach right in the heart of the community."

"And at a decent price," Lia added. "People know good value for money when they see it. That's why they keep coming back. Plus the all year around Christmas coffees no one else in town serves. Not to mention the book stall." She paused as the song ended.

Jordan started speaking again. "*So, the tenth annual Battle of the Flowers should prove to be bigger and better than ever this year...*"

"Earth to Lia, come in Lia, your time is up." A hand waved in front of her face.

"Sorry..."

Paula grinned. "It's kind of cute, but please, crush on him when we're not busy. I'm trying to have a staff meeting here." She

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looked up. “And here’s the guest of honor just in time. Would you like tea or coffee, Pastor?”

Pastor Jack Chambers smiled. “I’d prefer tea, please.” He sat at the table with them. “I see you’re listening to my favorite radio station.”

“Lia won’t let us listen to anything else between two and five,” Trevor laughed. “She’s got a ‘thing’ for Jordan—” He put quote marks around the word thing and shot her a wink.

“I have not,” Lia protested, a little too much.

Paula set the tea on the table. “Uh huh, we believe you. Thousands don’t. OK, Pastor, you want to tell them?”

Pastor Jack picked up his cup and took a long sip. “Sure. I’d like the café to enter the Battle of the Flowers parade this year. We’ve never done it before, but we feel the time is right, especially as we’re well established on the High Street now, as well as in the chapel. I’d like us to have a float that showcases not only the café, but the church outreach to the community that you do here. Pastor Carson and I have discussed this at length with the elders, and we’ve agreed that the money for the flowers can come out of church funds. Frank Dobson from the haulage firm has

offered the use of a lorry for nothing. What I need from you guys is someone to design and decorate it. And then on the day itself, to ride on it in character."

He paused. "And we also need an entrant for the Miss Battle contest. Again, we'll put up the entry fee."

Lia studied her cup. He wasn't asking much then. Wisely, she kept that tongue in cheek, knowing full well that voicing it would land her in hot water.

Trevor grinned playfully at his wife. "That counts me out. And Paula is getting on a bit now, too."

"If you say so, old man," Paula teased back.

"I do, wife. And Danni's baby bump kind of puts her out of the running, not that pregnant women aren't attractive—"

Danni threw a serviette at him and rested a hand protectively on her stomach. "How about you quit while you're ahead? Keith reckons I'm prettier now than seven months ago, but he's yet to convince me on that score. I think that Lia should do it. By default, she's the only *miss* in the room right now. But only if she wants to. It's meant to be fun, right?"

Terror shot through Lia, closing her throat and making her heart thud rapidly. All those people looking at her? She couldn't.

She'd rather go to the dentist and have six teeth pulled *without* anesthetic. Or die. Actually, death would be the better option as it would solve the problem all together. She shook her head. "I...I don't think so. Why can't Beth do it? She's far prettier than I am. And younger."

"I want someone who works here full time to enter," Paula said. "As good a barista as Beth is, she only works Saturdays and the odd afternoon when she's free after college."

"But that..." Lia looked at Pastor Jack in the desperate hope he'd take her side. "If you really want someone to enter this contest thing, shouldn't Cassie do it, as she's your wife?"

Pastor Jack grinned. "She's tied up with the Girls' Brigade float with Lara, for one thing. And for another, she doesn't work here. This is the café entry, not the church one—the elders wouldn't go for that idea. And if you need a third reason, Cassie's married. The contestants have to be single."

All eyes turned to Lia, and she wanted to shrivel and fade. The same way the flowers would wither at the end of the festival.

Paula and Trevor chorused in unison, "Well?"

She shook her head, not needing time to consider the idea. Doing anything like that,

where she'd be the sole focus of attention was her worst nightmare personified. "No."

~*~

"And we'll be right back after the news read by Shawn Williams." Jordan pushed back in his chair and shoved the left headphone behind his ear. He looked over at the sound engineer, Eddie Thompson. "Five minutes, right?"

Eddie jerked his head in affirmation. "Give or take a few seconds either side."

Jordan stood and put the headphones on the desk. "In that case, I'll be right back. Can you play the next record straight after the news if I'm not here?"

"No probs."

He left the small studio and pulled his mobile phone from his jeans pocket as he headed down the corridor. Seven messages, none important enough to worry about at the moment. It never ceased to amaze him that he got more texts while he was working than during the rest of the day. And that was just his personal phone. Anything show related came through to the station phone.

He'd just reached the mens' room when his phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket again and glanced at it. Maybe he'd better

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take this call. It might be urgent. “Hey, Pastor. How are you?”

“I’m good.” Pastor Jack sounded remarkably chirpy. But then in the several years Jordan had known him, he’d never found him to be anything less. “I’ve just spoken to the staff at the Three-Sixteen café, and they’re all in favor of entering a float for the parade. Are you still up for doing the interview?”

“Sure am. I’ll get the email sent out this afternoon. Any idea who’ll be coming in?”

“No, I haven’t told them about that yet, thought I’d do that next. They’re discussing the float at the moment. I won’t keep you. I know you’re on a break as they have the radio playing in the background. It seems some of your biggest fans work here. Speak soon.”

“Sure, bye.” Jordan put his phone away and headed into the mens’ room.

Three minutes later, he slid back into his chair and pulled on the headphones. “And we’re back. Today we’re talking about next week’s Battle of the Flowers. Did you know that in ancient times the actual battle occurred after the floats were dismantled? The flowers would be used as ammunition between spectators and participants. Reckon the council would be up for that this year?”

He grinned at Eddie. "Eddie's shaking his head no here. As well as the parade of flower floats, there will be music, dancers, and majorettes as well as street entertainers and a steam fair set up at Victoria Park. This year there is the new addition of a twilight parade where all the floats will be illuminated.

"The *Miss Battle of the Flowers* contest application forms can be picked up from the radio station, council offices, and most of the local High Street shops. The closing date for that is Friday with the contest itself next week. So if you fancy entering, don't hang around. The runner up becomes Maid of Honor.

"And you'll be pleased to know that the Mr. Battle tradition is being revived this year." Jordan rolled his eyes at Eddie. "Eddie's doing his strong man impression here, so it's just as well you can't see it. There's no contest for that one.

"The powers that be have asked me to do the job this year, so I'll be escorting Miss Battle to all the evening entertainments, as well as on the main float in the parade. Part of the prize this year, is dinner with me. Another reason to enter—if you need an incentive. The boss's words, not mine." He paused. "This is Lisa Bellamy with a track

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from her new CD, *I Take Refuge in the Shadow of My God.*"

~*~

Paula grinned at Lia. "See, now you *have* to enter. Because Miss Battle gets to have dinner with *him.*"

Lia laughed, hiding her terror behind humor as she so often did. "I don't think so."

Trevor winked at them as he rose to go back to the kitchen. "She wouldn't know what to say. She's in love with his voice, not the man."

Lia cheerfully threw a tea towel at him. "So, these flowers. Do you still want me to go down to the florist and see what colors they have and so on? If we're doing an entire lorry, we'll need a shed load."

Paula looked blankly at her. "Shed load?"

"Masses. Masses and masses and masses."

"OK, yes. By all means, order a shed load. Call in first thing tomorrow morning. It'll give you a chance to design something overnight."

"Me?" Lia said stunned. She'd never been able to arrange one vase of flowers, never mind a whole float.