



A ROMANTIC SUSPENSE FOR EVERY MONTH OF THE YEAR

CLARE REVELL

*'Mums in
November*

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Dedication

For Rhys. Because he's my favourite (and only) son

What People are Saying

Wednesday's Child...must hide for protection... Oh, the heartbreak that starts this story makes you wish it is only a dream. Poor Liam. And talk about "destiny"...Liam and Jacqui, although the sparks fly from the start (that's not necessarily a good thing) are clearly meant to be together. The time they spend together is so sweet! But when the past rears its ugly, evil head, only God can lead them to peace and forgiveness. This story is truly a depiction of good vs. evil—and we all know how that story will end! Great story! Loved it! ~ Donna B Snow

*Carnations in January shake the foundations
Violets in February are an aid to salvation
Daffodils in March bring betrayal and loss
Sweet peas in April consume all the dross
Lily of the Valley in May brings danger untold
Roses in June show hope in a heart filled with gold
Water lilies in July a town will submerge
Gladioli in August love from the ash will emerge
Forget-me-nots in September are on the front line of
fear
Marigolds in October will test her career
Chrysanthemums in November show the burden of
choice
Holly in December lets a broken family rejoice*

Chrysanthemums in November show the burden of choice

1

Dr. Jackson Parker pulled his collar tightly around his neck and wished he'd worn his hoodie. Bonfire night was one British custom he'd never understood. It might only be the beginning of November, but it was cold. His breath hung in the chill night air that filled the barn.

Not even the mug of soup in his hand and the thick gloves he wore could thaw out his numb fingers. Cupping both of his hands around the disposable container, he took a deep breath, the rich tomato scent hitting the back of his throat. He followed it up with several long swallows. Not as good as the soup his mother used to make, but not bad. He glanced at David Painter. "Is it cold enough for ya?"

His friend grunted. "It's a tad chilly, yeah."

"See, typical Brit who understates everything. We don't get weather like this in Texas. The average November temperature is between sixty-seven and seventy-nine. And that's Fahrenheit. None of this Celsius junk."

David smirked over the cup in his gloved hands. "And here I was thinking you were raised here and

would, therefore, be used to the weather and our ways.”

Jackson let out a huff of disdain. “I was partly raised over here. We moved where Dad’s job went. You’re a cop. You need to remember these things a little better. Is Eden not with you tonight?”

“She’s not feeling too great. She said she’d keep Marc in the warm instead of finding a babysitter.” David frowned. “Actually, she’s been sick on and off for a week or so now, and keeps trying to downplay it. You know how women are.”

“Nope, not a clue. But if she’s still sick on Monday have her come and see me. It’s probably nothing, but I’d rather check her over and find nothing wrong, than have her laid up like she was in March.”

A hand dropped on Jackson’s shoulder. Adam West had joined them. “Are things really that slow at work that you have to drum up trade?”

“Not at all, but I gotta keep busy somehow. I didn’t think you were coming. When I saw Sam yesterday, she said you were buried in this huge case at the Crown Court and didn’t even have time to breathe. By the way, you need to see me as soon as possible. Breathing is kinda essential to staying alive.”

Adam chuckled. “My feet don’t touch the ground these days, but Sam wanted to come. And as she’s been able to do so little recently, I didn’t like to say no.”

Jackson glanced over at Adam’s wife. Sam was bundled up against the cold, leaning against a huge hay bale talking animatedly to Jude Travis, who was flashing around her new engagement ring.

Jackson shook his head. “I’m beginning to reconsider my church membership,” he said wryly. “Being a part of this congregation is dangerous.”

David and Adam exchanged a long look.

"How so?" Adam asked.

"Have you any idea how many people got engaged or married this year?"

David laughed. "Don't knock love until you've tried it."

Jackson waved his cup at them. "Hey, you two are case in point."

"I never got unmarried," Adam protested.

"OK, so what about David here? He was engaged for, what, six weeks?"

"Six months," David corrected. "And married life is—"

Jackson cut him off. "I'm making a strategic exit if you two start to discuss the joys of married life." He headed over to the trash can, dropped his empty cup into it, and walked away. He mingled for a while, making small talk, not entirely sure why he'd come.

Aaron Field, the farmer who owned the land, waved to him from the hay bale where he and his wife perched.

Jackson headed over to them. "Hey, how's the arm, Meggie?"

"Sore. I'll be glad to get the cast off."

"I bet. Just don't go jumping off any more hay bales tonight because I'm off duty."

Color filled Meggie's cheeks, and she glanced at Aaron. "Or get pushed off them."

Aaron grinned. "Hey, in my defense you did say 'push me,' so I was merely doing as I was told."

Jackson chuckled. "I thought it was the woman who obeyed." He winked and waited for retaliation. Then, the sight of a woman on the other side of the barn drew his attention. She looked kinda familiar.

“Who’s that?”

Aaron followed his gaze. “I don’t know her name. She’s only just started coming to church. Moved here from Canada so I heard.”

At that moment the woman turned and Jackson stood rigid.

Amber Neville.

He hadn’t seen her since he’d left the school they’d both attended during his father’s stint at the UK embassy. She’d been head girl to his head boy in their last year. She was stuck up, bossy, and a pain in the butt.

But, wow. Sweater, jeans, knee-length leather boots, heels far too high for a farm, and a leather jacket that came to her waist. Her red hair was pulled back in a high ponytail that still reached past her shoulders. The eyes he knew to be green were dark and dimmed in this light.

“Breathe, Jackson, before you die on the spot.” Aaron sounded amused.

Jackson sucked in a deep breath, unable to pull his gaze away.

Aaron shook his head. “Do you two know each other?”

“We used to, a very long time ago. It’s been...” He paused. “It must be at least twenty years, if not more. Not since school.”

“Then go and say hello.”

“No.” Jackson shook his head as their gazes met, and her eyes widened in recognition. A very un-Christian phrase that he hadn’t used since his conversion ran through Jackson’s mind and almost spilled from his lips before he reigned it in. Obviously, she hadn’t forgotten him either.

Amber Neville stood rooted to the spot. Of all the people she'd met since she fled Canada and arrived in Headley Cross, Jackson Parker was the last person she expected. She'd picked a town she'd never lived in, only to discover an amazing church family that welcomed her. Along with a cousin who'd asked her to stay for as long as she needed somewhere to live.

Maybe it wasn't Jackson. After twenty years, she couldn't be sure. She nudged Niamh Harkin, her cousin's wife. "Who's that over there? Long dark blondish hair, green coat, staring at us?"

"That, my dear, is Jackson Parker, doctor, church member, upstanding pillar of the community." Niamh grinned. "And, apparently, he's unable to take his eyes off you either."

Amber froze. The only American kid in the entire school, Jackson was brash, rude, arrogant, self-centered, and had a penchant for getting his own way. She'd wanted Simon Payne to get the headship along with her. Then she could have spent time with him and maybe he'd have liked her.

Instead, she got Jackson, the one kid in her year who seemed impervious to her, whereas everyone else just plain didn't like her. Which didn't make being head girl any easier.

However, she had to admit he'd changed over the years. The spots had gone, and so had the dark hair. His longish locks were now fairer than she remembered, with a lean muscular frame peeping through his open, full length coat.

Niamh nudged her. "Are you OK? You look as if

you've seen a ghost."

"I guess I have." Amber swallowed, trying to regain her composure. "We were at school together. From what I remember, his father was working over here, doing something in the American Embassy. I never did find out what. He left soon after our final exams." She tore her gaze away and took a step to the side.

From the way the man stared, he recognized her too, and that could only lead to problems in the future.

Maybe she should move, again. Start over someplace else. But her ankle had other ideas as she made a misstep on the uneven straw surface, and it twisted beneath her, sending her to the ground in an undignified heap. Clucking in embarrassment, Amber tried to get up, but found herself unable to do so.

Niamh dropped to her side, and called over her shoulder. "Jackson?"

"Don't," Amber hissed, grabbing her ankle as pain speared her. "This is embarrassing enough as it is. Just give me a second and I'll be right as rain."

"Too late, he's coming over."

"I'm off duty, Niamh." The slow Texan drawl hadn't changed over the years. It grated as much as it ever had.

"And if there was a fire, Jared would just stand and watch it burn."

Jackson grinned. "Of course he would. That is why we're here tonight, right, to watch the bonfire burn?"

Niamh chuckled. "Jackson, this is Amber. Amber, Jackson. I'll leave you in his capable hands."

Niamh had obviously mistaken her horror for interest. Amber looked up at Jackson. His hands were the last place she wanted to be left. Now or ever.

2

Amber's face burned as Jackson knelt beside her. "You don't need to bother. I'm fine."

"Which would be why you're on the floor of the barn and everyone else is standing. Of course it could be a localized earthquake, but I don't think so." His tone of voice seemed disparaging. "I reckon the culprit is right here." He tapped her boots. "You do know that high heels and farms don't exactly mix."

Amber grimaced. "I know that now."

Jackson unzipped her boot, gently extricating her foot and running his hands over her ankle. His fingers were cold and, as gentle as he was, it hurt more than she would admit.

"What are you doing?"

"Making sure you haven't broken anything, and I don't need to call an ambulance. I'm a doctor."

"So Niamh said." She hissed in pain, blinking hard. She wouldn't cry in front of him or the small crowd that had gathered.

Fortunately, Niamh was sending them away, assuring them everything was fine.

"You've just twisted it. I'll wrap it for you, and you'll be dancing in no time. Stay here; I'll get my bag from the car." He broke off as the man who was hosting this event appeared with a first aid kit. "Alternatively, I'll use Aaron's."

"Are you OK?" the farmer asked.

"He's afraid you'll sue," Jackson joked. "He owns the land."

"I'm fine, other than making a total idiot of myself," Amber said, her cheeks burning. "I've no intention of suing anyone. Ignore the doctor." She watched as Jackson deftly bound her ankle, the tight strapping easing some of the pain.

"Do you have any other shoes with you?" he asked.

Amber shook her head. "No."

"No, of course not," he muttered. Somehow, he managed to get her boot back on and zipped.

"Are you this rude to all your patients?" she asked.

"Most of the time. It's called being brutally honest, Miss Neville. Something you should know all about."

She bit her lip. The old Amber would have flung back a retort. "Well, thank you for your assistance, Dr. Parker."

Surprise flickered in his eyes. "Are you driving home later? Because I'd strongly recommend..."

"I haven't been back in England long enough to have a car yet. I had a lift."

He nodded and helped her to her feet.

She winced and stumbled as she tried to put weight on her injured foot. OK, that wouldn't work right now. "Perhaps I'll just sit for a while," she gasped, wondering if she'd gone as white as she felt.

The farmer appeared with a chair, and she gratefully sank onto it.

"Thanks."

Jackson seemed to have disappeared, which was a good thing.

Had everyone seen her fall? And why-oh-why did it have to be Jackson Parker who came to her aid? Of all the men in all the world, it had to be him. How much worse could things get?

Jackson picked up two coffees and returned to Amber. She sat with her eyes closed. She was still the stubborn girl he remembered.

Stuff got done her way or not at all. Including the school prom—not that they called it that. It was the 'fifth form leaver's party'.

He'd wanted a US style prom. She hadn't. They'd fought, and she'd won. He perched on a bale of hay next to her. "I got you some coffee. I hope you drink it black."

She opened gorgeous green eyes and stretched out a perfectly manicured hand. "Thank you."

"Welcome." He rested his wrists on his knees and sipped his coffee. "Have you been to one of these before?"

"No. I've been working abroad the past three years or so. I've only been back in England a couple of months."

"Where did you work?"

She hesitated for a second or two before answering. "Canada."

"Nice." He took a long sip of the hot liquid. "What do you do?"

"Nannying." She looked down at the cup.

"Go figure." He whistled.

Amber frowned. "What does that mean?"

"I never put you down as someone who'd want to

get their hands messy." He tilted his head and studied her. "And you don't get much messier than small kids."

She frowned. It was almost as if the coffee had turned to acid in her stomach. "Yeah, well, it was a job."

He nodded to the locket around her neck. "That's pretty."

She tucked the gold pendant with its intricate pattern under her sweater. "Thanks."

"So what brings you here?"

There was a long pause. "I could ask you the same question."

Jackson pointed over his cup at her. "Yeah, but I asked first."

"My job ended, and I needed a fresh start. Jared and Niamh said I could crash with them for a while until I got back on my feet, no pun intended. I'm flat and job hunting." She swallowed and crumpled the cup in her hand. "Your turn."

"Well, after school I moved back to the States. I went to UNC as an undergrad, and then on to the med school there, and here I am."

"Not in the US."

"Nope. Right here in Headley Cross. A long way from the central London school we both went to."

"Well, it was, uh, nice to see you," she said quietly.

Jackson got the underlying message, 'nice to see you, now please leave.' Tossing his cup into the bin, he took several long strides that took him to the edge of the barn.

David called to him as he walked out of the barn. "Jackson?"

"I'm calling it a night and heading home."

"But the fireworks haven't started yet. You can't miss them."

Jackson stopped walking for just a moment trying to make sense of the deep attraction to this woman he was feeling at the moment. "It's been a really long day. See you in church tomorrow."

Amber sat there as Jackson left, the coffee turning to stone.

Her cousin, Jared Harkin, appeared and sat beside her. "Everything all right?"

"I think so." She sucked in a deep breath. "My ankle's sore, and I've made enough of a fool of myself for one evening. I think I'd like to go home."

He reached in his pocket, obviously checking for his car keys. "OK, I'll take you."

Amber shook her head. "No, it's fine. I'll get a taxi."

"Don't be silly."

She stood, experimentally putting weight on her foot. Her ankle held. "I'm not ruining yours and Niamh's night too, Jared. When was the last time you two did anything on your own together? I'll get a taxi, go home and relieve your babysitter. There's no need for either of you to rush back."

She pulled out her phone and rang for a taxi. As she waited for the call to connect, she hobbled slowly into the farmyard focusing on putting one foot in front of the other.

Headlights blinded her.

Brakes squealed.

Amber tensed and waited for the impact.