



A ROMANTIC SUSPENSE FOR EVERY MONTH OF THE YEAR

CLARE REVELL

*Holly in
December*

Holly in December

Clare Revell

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Holly in December

COPYRIGHT 2016 by Clare Revell

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version^(R), NIV^(R). Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.TM Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2016

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-979-9

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For Tom. A son in all but name.

What People are Saying

Aussie Christmas Angel

Do you like to visit new places? Do you like Christmas themed stories? Do you enjoy a sweet romance? Then you might want to check out this tale, based on a condensed version of a true story as explained in the author's note at the end of the book. The major take-home value of this short story is a great one! God can use anything and all circumstances to bring about His purposes. ~ JoAnn Carter

*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*

Holly in December lets a broken family rejoice

For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. Luke 15:24

1

The clock chimed nine as Hope Hargitay ran up the stairs and into the office. Almost late, but not quite, her morning had started with a dead alarm clock, a child who didn't want to go to school, but then which child ever did, and a car that refused to start without a fight. It really needed to be garaged, not left on the street in the below freezing temperatures of an English winter.

She dumped her bag on the desk, tossed her coat on the back of the chair, and consoled herself with the thought that the day couldn't get much worse. She needed a mug of hot coffee and ten minutes to sit at her desk and read the case notes for today, before putting her calls in order of priority.

Mr. Turnbull, head of her section of the Department of Social Security, stuck his head out of his corner office. "Hope, my office. Now."

She shot him a smile. "Give me a sec, I only just got in."

"Now!" he repeated.

Hope realized three things at once. Her desk, aside from her handbag, was clear and the inbox empty. Last night it had been full to overflowing.

Second, the room was silent and everyone's attention was on her.

Thirdly, there was someone else in the boss's office.

She swallowed, trying to ignore the sense of impending doom. "OK, I can do now."

She crossed the office, the only sound being her footsteps, her stomach pitting further with each step. This would not be good.

"Shut the door and sit down."

A bundle of nerves, Hope did as instructed. "What have I done?"

Mr. Turnbull's face creased with anger, yet he kept his voice low and guarded. "You know Mrs. Wilson, head of Berkshire Social Services?"

Hope nodded. "By sight, yes."

"Good. Saves on the introductions. I'll cut to the chase, Hope. There have been several allegations made against you in the past few days. With evidence to back them up. I'm afraid we have no alternative but to let you go."

Hope looked at him, her stomach plummeting to the soles of her shoes. "What?" Maybe she'd misheard him. "What allegations?"

"Misappropriation of funds, abuse, and improper conduct."

Hope shook her head. "I've never heard anything so ridiculous. Where did you hear this?"

"It came from several sources, and a complaint from two of your clients."

Hope looked down at her hands. Who could hate

her this much, that they'd spread lies about her?

She swallowed hard. "I don't understand. You have to believe me. I would never do something like that."

Mrs. Wilson cleared her throat. "There are also suggestions that you are involved in solicitation. There has to be an investigation. You know what will happen if the press gets wind of this, which they are bound to do so."

Hope sat bolt upright, shock slamming into her. Where had that one come from? How had they...? "I'm innocent," she protested. "You can't think otherwise."

"Mud sticks, Hope. Even if the investigation clears you, no one in the department will trust you again. I'm sorry it's come to this, but we have to protect the children in our care and the reputation of the department. You'll be given three month's severance pay, which is pro rata for your length of service."

Hope shook her head. "What happens to the flat?" she asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"You have until the end of the week to find somewhere else to live. The flat goes with the job. As does the car. I'll need the keys."

"But it's Thursday. You can't just throw me out like that." Shock ricocheted through her. "How am I supposed to find somewhere else to live by tomorrow? It's December. I have a daughter."

"Evidently you are in breach of the terms of the housing lease as well. Perhaps we should consider a care order for your daughter if the charges against you are proved," Mrs. Wilson said. "After all, you can't look after your daughter from a prison cell. We'll let you know the outcome of the investigation and whether the police need to be involved, but I imagine

they will be." She turned to Mr. Turnbull. "Maybe even a temporary care order, given the severity of the charges."

"I'm innocent. And I'm more than capable of looking after Angel," Hope said quietly. They'd made their decision, and she'd let them stand and fall by it. She stood. "I'll be off then." She removed her pass from her neck and placed both it and her car keys on the desk. Without another word, she turned and left the office.

She crossed back to her desk, silence echoing in the full room. Her cheeks and eyes burned as she picked up her bag. She'd put everything she had into this job. Turned her life around, made something of herself, for it all to be torn down and pulled away from her.

The whispering began as she left the office and headed down the stairs. Why would anyone do this to her? She'd once lived the wrong side of the law, but that was before Angel was born. Since then, she'd gone to college, got good grades, a degree, a job, home. She pulled on her coat as she exited the building. The cold winter wind blasted through her, and she tugged the hood around her head. Tears blurred her vision as she began to walk home.

Early Christmas shoppers thronged the streets. Bright lights shone everywhere, in a direct contrast to the dark despair filling her. She shoved her hands into her pockets as she walked. Would she even find a new job with something like this hanging over her head?

Maybe something would turn up in a shop, but it had to fit in with school hours. Whatever happened, she wouldn't lie to get new employment. Lying was one thing she tried not to do any more. If there was a

criminal investigation going on, anyone would soon figure out who she was.

Perhaps she should have chosen a more common surname when she'd changed her name by Deed Poll all those years ago. Like Smith, or Jones.

She passed several houses bearing holly wreaths on the front door. Holly stood for respect, modesty, and faithfulness. Some of the things she'd lost around the same time she'd left home—run away from home. Stubbornness, pride, and fear had kept her away the past nine years.

The prickly green holly plant with its blood red berries always reminded her of Christmas when she was a kid, in the days when she had a home and a family. Well, technically she still did, two hundred miles away in the Fens. Her parents had a holly tradition, something she'd carried on with Angel each year; although it never felt quite the same.

Hope was never sure whether that was because she was grown up or because she and Angel were alone. And now they were homeless and, if she didn't find another job soon, penniless. Still, she'd turned her life around once before. She could do it again.

A block of flats loomed before her. She lived in the dank, oppressive and smelly housing without complaint as the flat came with the job. Some daft idea the council had about social workers relating to clients better, and using her as an experiment to see if it worked. Well, apparently it made her just like her clients! It was no place to raise her daughter, but neither were the streets.

Slowly Hope climbed the stairs to the fifth floor, not surprised the lift still hadn't been fixed. It hadn't worked in all the years she'd been living here. Banging

echoed down the landing as she reached her floor. She rounded the corner.

The housing warden, Mr. Burns, pounded on her door. "I know you're in there, Hope," he yelled.

"Actually I'm not," she muttered. "I'm here," she called, hurrying down the landing towards him.

Mr. Burns turned to her. "I just got off the phone with Turnbull. He says you're to leave."

"I know, and he gave me until tomorrow, but I was hoping you'd give me a few more days—"

He cut her off with a wave of his hand. "You know I can't do that. The council pays your rent, and they cut that off from today. I would if I could, Hope, it being Christmas an' all, but this is meant to be a child free flat. I know you have a kid in there with you, but I let you stay anyways as the council was paying."

"I didn't know about the child free policy, though it does explain why there aren't any children for Angel to play with. The office knew about her when they placed me here."

"And I told them, but there you go. Problem is I've had no end of complaints about the noise she makes at all hours. Even if they hadn't stopped your funding and said you were to go, I'd have had to give you notice."

Shock resonated through Hope. Angel was a quiet kid. The only time she screamed was when she woke from a nightmare, which was hardly her fault. "OK, so I'm in violation of an agreement I didn't know about. I'm sorry, but I can't be blamed for that. Please, give me a few days to sort something out."

"I can't, I'm sorry. You have until tomorrow, but that's it."

Deciding not to argue and demean herself further,

Hope nodded slowly. She'd acquiesce while she still had some semblance of dignity left. "OK. I'll drop the keys off after the school run tomorrow morning."

Mr. Burns nodded and stomped off to the stairs.

Hope let herself into the flat and leaned against the front door. Tears filled her eyes. How much worse could the day get? Where did she go? The only family she had in town was an aunt, but calling her would be her last resort. She rubbed her hand over her eyes and looked at her watch. She had five hours before Angel finished school for the day. That should be enough time to find somewhere to live.

She'd long wanted out of this flat and now she had it. Perhaps this would be one of the blessings in disguise her mother used to talk about, as did Faith, one of her sisters. But that was another lifetime ago.

She moved to the window, watching the rain beat against it. One good thing about her job was she knew where all the homeless shelters, along with all the shelters for women and children, were located, in and around Headley Cross. And, more importantly, which ones to avoid. She pulled the phone towards her, hoping it hadn't been cut off yet and grabbed the receiver. Hearing the dial tone, she began calling.

An hour later she'd exhausted her list of contacts. No one had room for her and Angel. They could take the child, but not her, and that was not an option. Taking a deep breath, Hope called the last place on her list, but didn't hold out much hope. As far as she knew this was just a temporary place open over the winter, taking people in on a first come, first served daily basis.

"Care at Christmas, Tori Branning speaking."

"Hello, my name is Hope Hargitay. I need a place

to stay. My daughter and I are homeless from tomorrow. I've tried everywhere, but nowhere has room for the both of us and I don't want us to be separated."

"How old is your daughter?"

"She's eight, and she's no trouble. I have a little money, but I lost my job today and the housing goes with it."

"You can have room and board in exchange for work," Mrs. Branning told her.

Hope's eyes welled up. "Really? You don't need me to come down first or want a reference?"

"No. Ten thirty tomorrow morning with your things is fine. See you then."

The line went dead.

Hope looked at the phone in disbelief. Was it really that easy?

The following morning she took Angel to school and went back to the flat to finish packing what she could into the one case and two bags she owned. Even though she didn't understand, Angel had taken the news they were moving with her usual aplomb and obediently packed her clothes and toys in the case. She'd actually been more bothered about the loss of the car than anything else.

In the drawer beside the bed lay a photo. Battered with age and slightly faded, it showed her at sixteen, with her parents, two sisters and brother. Almost tempted to leave it behind, she slid it into her purse.

Hope looked at the case and crammed the rest of Angel's things into it. She wouldn't need much herself,

but was determined Angel wouldn't suffer because of something that had happened to her. She shoved three changes of clothes for herself into the rucksacks along with toiletries. Then, she glanced around. Not much to show for five years of her life.

Shouldering one rucksack, she stuck the other over the handles of the case and headed onto the landing for the last time. Dragging the case behind her, she stopped at the top of the stairs, wondering how she would get down the ten flights and five floors with the case.

A tall, dark haired gentleman moved to one side to allow her to pass. "Morning."

"Morning." Hope nodded back. Manners cost nothing, or so her mother used to tell her all the time. She looked down the stairwell. As usual several of the lights were out, making it appear to be a yawning chasm.

"Can I give you a hand with that case?" the man asked.

She caught her breath, half tempted to say no, but he had offered, and she wasn't sure she'd manage otherwise. "That would be very kind, sir. Thank you."

He smiled and easily picked up the case. "Going all the way down?" He paused. "Actually, on reflection, that's a silly question."

"Yeah, all the way down."

He set off down the stairs, as if the case and bags were weightless.

Hope followed, her mind whirling. She almost lost her footing twice and was grateful she wasn't carrying anything. It wouldn't be the first time she'd fallen down them.

The man was waiting with her case at the bottom

of the stairs. That surprised her. She'd half-expected him to leg it with all her stuff. He shot her a smile which showed perfect, straight white teeth.

"Thank you," she said.

His smile widened. "You're welcome. Going anywhere nice?"

She frowned. "I'm sorry?"

"The case. Are you going to stay somewhere nice?"

Oh, he must think she was going on holiday. She shrugged. "I hope so."

"Can I give you a lift anywhere? It's pretty nippy out there today."

She shook her head. "You've been kind enough, sir. Thank you." She didn't want anyone knowing she was moving into a homeless shelter.

"You're welcome." He nodded, as if tipping his hat like only a proper, old fashioned gentleman would do.

She gripped the case before he could change his mind and insist on driving her. She headed down the street. She had to clear her name or hope that the investigation would. But even if it did, apparently her career was over.

Pastor Nick Slater stood watching the disconsolate figure trudge away. Sorrow seemed to ooze from every part of her, overshadowing her natural beauty. It wasn't a holiday. She'd have been happier if it was.

He prayed for her as she headed down the road. She couldn't be much more than mid-twenties. Was she the woman with the child the other tenants were

complaining about? Had they succeeded in their attempts to get her evicted?

Shaking his head, he turned back to the stairs. This block of flats wasn't the greatest place to live, but it was all he could afford on his pastor's salary, while he saved for a house. He was the assistant pastor to Headley Baptist, a growing Evangelical church in the heart of Headley Cross.

It was a three-year appointment, and he was three months into it and loving it. Every part of the work filled him with joy and enthusiasm, whether it was children's work, visiting the sick, or even offering to help out at the homeless shelter in town.

OK, he hadn't expected the other elders to be so keen for him on that idea when he'd suggested a short term thing over the Christmas period. He'd go there for an hour or so each day, bar Sundays, church work permitting, and do whatever he could to help those in need, starting Tuesday.

He trotted back up the stairs, grateful for the three years he'd spent in the army. He'd kept up the same level of fitness, running, doing sit ups, and push-ups every day, and it seemed to be keeping him trim. This had turned out to be an advantage now he lived on the fifth floor in a block of flats with no working lift.

He caught sight of his reflection in the steel doors of the non-working lift and shoved a hand through his black hair. No matter what he did to it, his hair would never lie flat. Perhaps he should do what his mother suggested and invest in hair gel. It was just so nineteen twenties. And he was a modern, twenty-first century bloke. Maybe he should just cut it really short. He'd worn his hair short during his army days, and it was definitely easier to care for.