

THERE'S A MONSTER LURKING IN THE SHADOWS  
THE LIGHT MAY NEVER SHINE AGAIN.

CLARE  
REVELL

A CHRISTIAN GOTHIC™  
CHRISTMAS ROMANCE



*Once Upon a  
Christmas*

# Once Upon a Christmas

Clare Revell

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## **Once Upon a Christmas**

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## *Dedication*

For the little girl who never grew up. Who still loves  
fairytale, a happily ever after, and heroines who can  
stand on their own two feet, but still need a hero to  
love them.



## *What People are Saying*

### *Once Upon a Christmas*

Not your average holiday novella by a long shot, *Once Upon a Christmas* charms and captivates bringing mesmerizing characters to life. Set aside a delicious day to race to the finish. You won't want to put it down until you find out just what lies behind Mr. Shade's mysterious facade. ~ Jan Elder, Author of the Moose Creek Series

*Down in Yon Forest* - Fantastic. Awesome. A must read. I couldn't put the story down until I finished the last page. I absolutely loved this book! Highly recommended! ~ Wendy Davy







*For He has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; He has not hidden His face from him but has listened to his cry for help. ~ Psalm 22:24*

# 1

Hayden Shade sat with his back to the window; as always his body deliberately obscured from view. Not simply because this gave him the advantage over everyone else. He had excellent reasons for being hidden. The deformity which had plagued him since early childhood necessitated wearing a mask, keeping to the shadows, or bathing the room in almost complete darkness. All three worked, but his preference was darkness.

It saved him the trouble of explaining the mask he wore. Or why the hood of his cloak always covered his head and face.

A knock echoed in the quiet room.

Hayden's chin snapped up and he stared across the room. "Come."

Torrance, his butler, opened the door, his figure silhouetted against the light from the hallway. "Mr. Hosier is here to see you, sir."

"Send him in."

Hayden leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers, phrasing what he would say in his head. He ran his business from home, communicating via phone with the office and, if a face-to-face consultation was

necessary, people came to him. After all, he was the boss. Therefore if he wanted to work from home, he would.

Home was a large country estate, fifty miles to the west of London, which he'd bought and renovated three years ago. What little family he had left remained in the Scottish Highlands. He hadn't seen them in well over two decades, and that suited him fine. First they'd sent him to a specialist boarding school, where he'd been shunned and teased, before they'd disowned him and tossed him into the foster care system. It was their loss.

Some would argue that he could live anywhere and communicate with the office. Not so. It would take far too long for someone to come from London to Paradise. Besides, no one knew him here. He'd left the past behind, aside from the constant and very obvious reminder he lived with every moment of every day.

No doubt the locals were curious about the owner of the manor they never saw, but they respected his privacy, as he did theirs.

A small, grey man crept into the room, interrupting his chain of thought.

Hayden had always thought of the man as a mouse. Now he knew the truth, the man was a rat, not a mouse. "Mr. Hosier. Thank you for coming in."

Frank Hosier, accountant, tiptoed over to the desk, his hands clasped in front of him. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes." Hayden resisted the temptation to tell him to stop simpering, and raised a hand as the man bent to fold himself into a chair. "Don't sit down."

Mr. Hosier straightened, his nose twitching. He wrung his hands together. "How can I help you?"

Hayden cut straight to the chase. "The tax office called. Apparently, I owe five million in back taxes. Now, I thought they'd been paid. That you, as my accountant, had paid Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs the money they were due. So I did some checking. Would you care to tell me what I found?"

The man in front of him hunched his shoulders, almost visibly shrinking. "I can explain."

"I would really love to hear that explanation." Hayden would have narrowed his eyes and stared the man down, but as he was hidden in the darkness there was no point. Instead he raised his voice. "Because I assume it really is a fascinating story. Why did you feel the need to pocket my money and use it as your own? If you needed an advance on your wages, all you had to do was ask. I'm sure we could have made some deal. Instead, you stole from me. Why?"

"My wife was sick. The medical bills..."

"Don't lie to me and make the situation worse. We don't pay medical bills; the National Health Service covers most things apart from hospice care. Besides, I happen to know your wife is quite well. The truth is she left you for another man twenty-two years ago, when your daughter was a child, and you now live with a woman you aren't married to. Am I right?"

"Yes. But—"

Hayden sighed. So like the man to quibble and argue. "Why can't you just be honest with me and admit the truth? Did you waste my money gambling on horses or dogs? Or are you more of a poker man?"

Mr. Hosier shrank even further. "Horses..."

*Finally, the truth. It was like getting blood out of a stone.* "So, what do we do now?"

"I'll pay the money back. A few good bets and I'll

easily make it on the accumulator."

"You don't have any money, and I refuse to give you any more of mine. My problem is, I'm an honest man and embezzling is a crime. Defrauding me, never mind HMRC, breaks several laws. I should call the police and let them and the courts deal with you. They won't be lenient and, I'm afraid, it will mean a hefty prison sentence."

The man pulled into himself even further. "Please, sir, there must be another way." The simpering tone became more of a whine. "My family depends on me. And it's almost Christmas. Can't we come to some arrangement? Make a deal of some kind? Give me time to find the money?"

"It's not Christmas for three more weeks." Hayden drummed his fingers on the desk, irritation with his soon-to-be-ex-accountant growing by the second. "There is one possibility to avoid my pressing charges. However, a deal of this magnitude comes with a price of its own."

"Anything." The desperate man in front of him grovelled, wringing his hands.

"You must attend counselling for your gambling addiction."

"I can do that." Mr. Hosier bobbed his head eagerly.

Hayden allowed himself a small smile as he contemplated the vermin in front of him. "Now, tell me about your daughter."

The annoying bobbing slowed to a stop. "Her name is Caitlyn. She's my blonde angel. If it wasn't for her, I would have given up long ago. She has such a sweet singing voice, she loves dancing, reading, and playing the piano."

Hayden smirked. "You allow me to marry Caitlyn, and I will drop the charges. Of course, you'll have to find other employment, but I'll give you a reference. Oh, and you will have no contact with your daughter for at least six months."

Mr. Hosier's face fell and he crumpled. "But—but she's my only child, my heart. Without her I..."

"I'm sure she'll agree that it's for the best. After all, it's marriage to me or see her father go to prison for the rest of his life. I want a decision by three o'clock this afternoon. I will make the arrangements for the marriage by special license to avoid waiting for several weeks."

He waved his hand. "Go home, talk to her and don't forget to empty out your desk from the main building. As of right now, you no longer work for me. Your reference will be in the post."

Mr. Hosier turned and trudged across the room to the door. He paused and glanced back. The man appeared positively broken. Then he left with a soft whimper, closing the door behind him.

Hayden flipped open the laptop and brought up Caitlyn Hosier's social media page. The girl liked taking selfies, but then what young woman didn't? He smiled as he read her latest escapade—a trip to the coffee shop in town. She'd tried the gingerbread latte for the first time and wasn't entirely sure whether she liked it or not. The gingerbread man that came with it however, she had marked as to die for.

He clicked on her profile and read again all the information she had posted about herself. She'd listed her age as twenty-six and her faith as Evangelical Christian. She attended one of the bigger churches in town, actually the same one he listened to online on a

Sunday morning and evening. They also shared many things in common—foods, films, music.

It should prove for an interesting match. Of course she'd want to marry in a church, and he'd had the chapel restored as part of the renovations to the house. He'd always known that one day when he married, it had to be done properly in the sight of God.

Marriage was a covenant between three people, the bride, the groom, and the Lord. A triangle, as well as a circle of never ending love. And a necessity to produce an heir, which he needed.

He stood and ambled to the window, leaning on the cane. Christmas was a holiday he shunned. At least the decorating part—he had his own, very private, way of celebrating. His live-in household staff had tried decorating in previous years. However, he'd found it was far easier to simply give them two weeks paid leave and live off the ready-prepared meals his housekeeper left him in the freezer.

This year, as always, they would leave on the evening of the twenty-first and return on the morning of January fourth—unless he tired of their company and dismissed them earlier. And if the maid continued singing *Deck the Halls* as she laid the fires at five in the morning, he might actually do that before the week was out. The silence Hayden always insisted on would then once more encompass the house. Just the way he liked it.

Except this year, God permitting, he wouldn't be alone.



Carols played in the background. Caitlyn Hosier

grinned at best friend, Meredith Mantle. "Who'd have thought this time last year we were preparing for the Paradise Christmas Ball, and here you are married." She paused. "And here I am, not. And neither of us are going to the ball, either."

"It's a shame things didn't work out with Ty." Meredith hung another ornament on the tree. "We'd have been related."

Caitlyn shook her head. "Ty's a nice enough bloke, but we have nothing in common. And I'm beginning to lose hope in David as well. He still hasn't called since that one date he took me on. I know he's far older than me, but age is simply a number, right?"

The door opened and her father and step-mother came in. Father cleared his throat, his face serious and pale. "Caitlyn, I need to speak with you. It's urgent."

Meredith stood. "I should be getting back. I promised Grannie I'd call in on my way home. She's coping OK on her own, but she's finding it hard with the anniversary coming up."

Caitlyn walked Meredith to the door. "I'll call later this evening. Bye." She closed the door and headed back into the lounge. "So what's wrong?"

Her father took a deep breath. "I got called in to see my boss. He made me an offer for your hand in marriage."

Caitlyn's stomach knotted and threatened to eject her lunch over her feet. She pushed her hands through her hair. She must have heard wrong. "He wants to *what*?" she managed, reaching out a hand to turn off the music, the carols incongruous now.

Her father's agonized gaze hit the floor, as if he couldn't quite bear to look at her. He seemed to have aged fifty years since he'd left home a few hours ago.

"He wants to marry you."

"He doesn't know the first thing about me. Why would he want to do that?"

"Because I messed up. I did something I shouldn't have and this is the only way he won't press charges."

Caitlyn swallowed hard. "Press charges?"

"I broke the law. I'd go to prison for a long time, possibly the rest of my life."

Shock turned to horror. "So you traded me for your freedom?"

Her father shook his head. "No. I'd never do that to you. This is your choice and yours alone. He granted me that much."

Caitlyn turned to her step-mother. She didn't really remember her birth mother, only a faint recollection of perfume. Naomi had never wanted to replace Mum, opting instead for the term Auntie. "Auntie Naomi..."

"I've spoken to Naomi," Father interrupted. "She's in agreement with me."

She turned away, her eyes burning. Marriage was something she'd always dreamed of, but not to her father's mysterious boss, who had a reputation for being a hard liner. Caitlyn's dreams lay with David, a local man from the same church. He'd told her he worked in an animal shelter, which she'd found adorable. They'd been on one date and got on pretty well. But this? This would end all that. Now her dreams lay shattered at the foot of the half-decorated Christmas tree. Scattered like the box of baubles she'd dropped, sparkling in the light, yet out of reach.

"How...how long have I got to think about it?" she whispered.

"I have to let him know by three."



She gasped as she glanced at her watch. "That's only an hour away."

Her father hurried over to her and gripped her hands. "I'm so sorry. If there was a way around this, some other way I could make amends, I'd do it, but there isn't." His gaze held hers. "If you can't do this, if you don't want to, then don't worry. I'll face up to what I've done and accept the consequences."

Caitlyn pulled her hands away. "I need time to think. I'll be in my room." She dashed from the lounge, before she really did cry. She shut the bedroom door and leaned against it. "Oh, Lord, what do I do?" she whispered. "I can't let Father go to prison, but to marry someone I don't know? Someone no one has ever seen or really knows? Someone with a reputation like Mr. Shade has? Even the name makes him seem dark." She shivered, wrapping her arms around herself as she paced to the window. "I wanted a future with David. He's tall, charming, handsome, and he likes me. He took me to the most expensive restaurant in town, and then kissed me on the doorstep when he dropped me home. OK, bells and whistles didn't go off and the stars didn't explode, but for a first kiss I wasn't expecting that."

Caitlyn sighed, studying the view of her garden. "I have to do this. Please promise me I'm not doing this alone. I have no idea if this Mr. Shade is a Christian or not. So I may well end up unevenly yoked. If I can ask two favours, Lord, please let it be a church wedding, and work this horrid situation for good."

Her gaze fell on the verse-of-the-day calendar on her desk. The one for today was Joshua 1:9. *"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be*

*with you wherever you go."*

"Thank you, Lord. OK, let's do this." She rubbed her hands over her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. Should she take everything? Would she be allowed home to get things she forgot? What did she do now?

Her hand rested on the locket her birth mother had left for her, along with a note saying 'sorry'. The note had long since been discarded, but the necklace she'd kept. Not that it was ever worn—it didn't really go with the jeans and baggy sweaters she preferred—but she'd take it with her. Decision made, there was no time to waste on questions she couldn't answer.

Father paced the living room floor. He stopped mid-stride as Caitlyn entered the room. "What did you decide?"

"I'll do it. I'll marry Mr. Shade."

Auntie Naomi grabbed her hand. "I promised your father I'd stand by your choice and agree with him. But, sweetheart, do you know what you're doing? Mr. Shade's a monster by all accounts. No one has ever seen him in the three years he's lived in the manor house. Rumour has it he's horribly disfigured, that he doesn't have a face. I've also heard he drinks all the time. And that he never bathes. Some say he's a vampire because he only comes out in the dark." She paused. "I've also heard he's a beast. That he was married once and his wife was murdered. Some say that he did it."

"I thought better of you," Caitlyn said. "You should know never to listen to rumours, much less repeat or believe them. I'm sure he can't be as bad as people say."

Father shook his head. "That's our Caitlyn. Always sees the good in everyone, even the worst

person imaginable." He paused. "Are you sure? You don't know what kind of a man he really is. Not as bad as Naomi makes out, but even I have never seen his face. After all this time."

"I know his reputation. He's a hard liner, sticks to his word. And if he is offering you a solution, then I have to take it."

Father held his gaze. "His reputation is only the half of it."

She shook her head. "My mind is made up. Call him. Tell him I'll do it."

Auntie Naomi shook her head, dismay reflected in her eyes. "I think you're crazy to even consider the idea. There are plenty of eligible bachelors out there. You don't have to accept the first one."

Father slowly pulled out his phone and dialed. "I can't dissuade you?"

"I'm not having you go to prison if I can avoid it." Caitlyn struggled not to raise her eyes heavenward. They needed to make up their minds. Either they did or didn't want her to do this. And if it really was her choice, they needed to back her one hundred percent now that she'd decided.

The call connected. "Can I speak to Mr. Shade please? It's Frank Hosier." There was a pause. "Yes, sir. She's agreed." He held the phone out to Caitlyn. "He wants to talk to you."

Caitlyn's hands were damp as she grabbed the phone, almost dropping it. Nerves tingled, a lump obstructed her airway. She turned away, wishing their first conversation could be in private. "Hello?"

"Hello, Caitlyn, my name is Hayden Shade. Are you making this decision of your own free will?"

She took a deep breath, not having expected that,

or for his voice to have a rough edge to it. Not that his tone was harsh, because it wasn't. It was almost as if he had a sore throat. And a hint of a Scottish accent. "Yes."

"Your father hasn't put any pressure on you, forced your hand, or coerced you in any way?"

"No."

"Then I'd like you to pack up all your belongings. I'll send someone to collect them in the morning. Bring a small case with you tonight. The car will pick you up in thirty minutes. Now, give the phone back to your father. I need to finalize the terms of our agreement."

Caitlyn held out the phone. "He wants to talk to you again. Something about terms."

Father nodded. "That would be the price he mentioned."

She staggered backwards, catching herself on the table. This was really happening. "Price? You're selling me?"

"Everything comes at a price, Caitlyn, you know that."

Shaking her head, she steeled herself. She didn't have time for weakness as she turned to her step-mother. "The car is picking me up in thirty minutes. I'm to take a small bag with me. He'll send for the rest of my things tomorrow. I'll need you to pack my stuff once I'm gone. Don't worry about the things in the loft, I can get them some other time, but my books and clothes from my bedroom can come tomorrow."

As she left the room, none of this seemed real. Like the brides of old, she was being sold to someone she didn't know.

## 2

Twenty minutes later, hoping she'd remembered to pack everything she'd need overnight, Caitlyn ran her gaze over the contents of her overnight bag. Bible, wash stuff, toothbrush, clean clothes for the morning, pj's, and her book. Everything else could follow on later.

She picked up the photograph of the family, slid it into the bag and zipped it up. She slid her mother's pendant over her head, tucking it under her sweater. Then she headed downstairs, footsteps dragging. Caitlyn set her case and handbag by the front door. "I think that's everything for now."

Auntie Naomi turned to her. "Have you rung David?"

She shook her head. "We only had one date. It wasn't like he'd proposed or anything—he didn't even bother to contact me again. I'm marrying Mr. Shade. The only person I ought to ring is Meredith, but I'll do that later tonight."

A car pulled up outside.

"OK, the car is here. I have to go. I love you."

Auntie Naomi hugged her, eyes glassy with unshed tears. "I love you, too."

Father kissed her cheek. "Take care. We'll send the rest of your things tomorrow."

Somehow his farewell seemed cold and final, as if he wasn't expecting to ever see her again. It chilled her