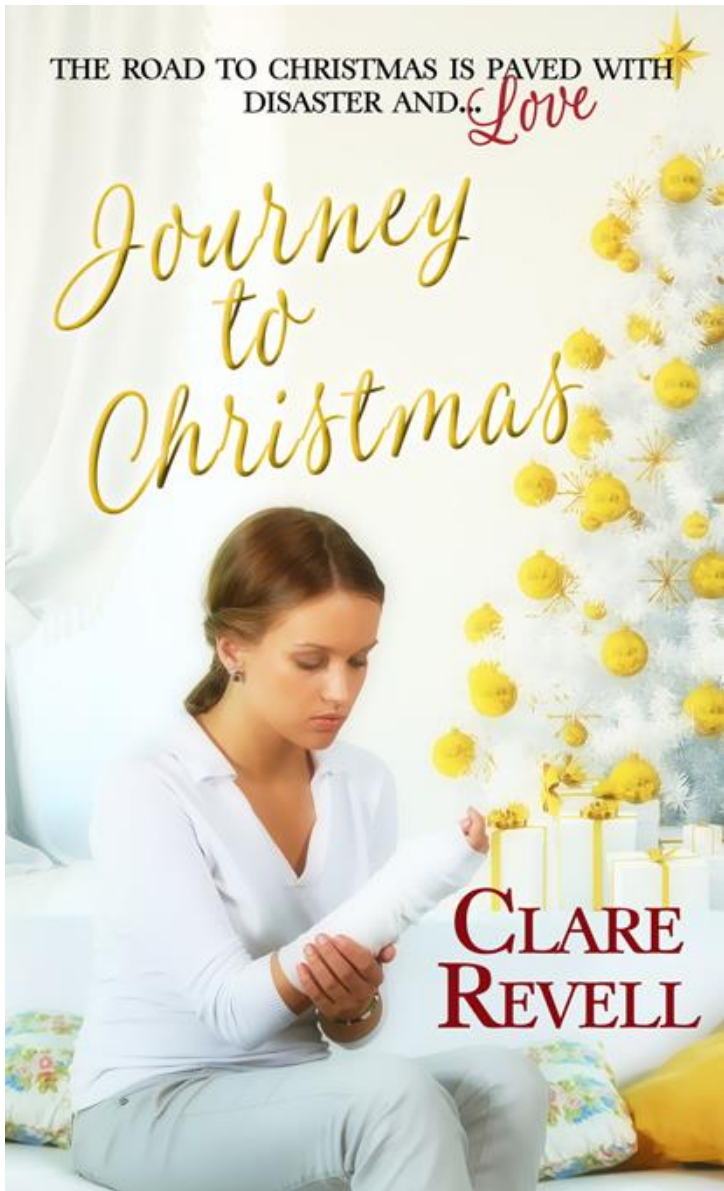


THE ROAD TO CHRISTMAS IS PAVED WITH
DISASTER AND... *Love*

*Journey
to
Christmas*

**CLARE
REVELL**



Journey to Christmas

Clare Revell

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Journey to Christmas
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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2018

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0181-3

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For all the teachers who inspire us and cheer us on
from the sidelines.

What People are Saying about Clare Revell

Down in Yon Forest - She writes books like Alfred Hitchcock and M Night Shyamalan direct and produce engrossing and captivating movies. A hint of an answer here, a red herring there, light here, dark there—Down in Yon Forest shines a bright light on her skills as a storyteller.

~ Marianne Evans

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 façade.

~ 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

1

Fraser Quirke sat in his new office and took a deep breath. Then another. He'd applied for and got this job sooner than he'd expected. The initial advert had said from January, but the board seemed to have other ideas. As had Ofsted, the government body in charge of overseeing all schools in the country. Headley Cross Secondary, responsible for 1,320 pupils, was failing, and it was his job to turn it around. By Christmas.

He'd wanted a challenge in his next posting. He'd actively prayed for a fortnight for God to give him a challenge. And he'd been given just that. Now all he needed was a deputy who'd rise up and help him drag this school back on its feet and make it shine like the beacon it used to be.

The board had their views on the subject, but Fraser preferred to pick his own right-hand man, or woman. He wanted someone already on staff, someone who knew the kids, knew the school, and the lay of the land. He glanced at the list of names he'd shortlisted from the files he'd read all weekend. He'd make his final decision tomorrow, once he'd spoken to all the staff individually.

Watching them during the upcoming class photos would be a good start—see the teachers in action handling their own tutor groups. And he'd call a whole school assembly for later that day. God had called him

here to shake things up, and that was precisely what he was going to do.

~*~

Paiton Underwood tugged the last box of scripts from the drama cupboard and sighed. Then she sighed again, longer and deeper, purely for effect. There had to be something more exciting in this box—some play that wasn't a hundred years old, politically incorrect, or hadn't been performed ad-nauseam over the last fifteen years. If there wasn't, she was stuffed.

The next ten minutes proved pointless and fruitless. Sitting back on her heels, Paiton concluded that she was definitely stuffed. She angled her head and glared at the box. No, not stuffed. She'd already applied that statement and wouldn't repeat herself. Even if she had just done that three times. After peering at each and every script in the box, all she'd found were more copies of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Sweeny Todd*. Neither of which she wished to do again. Oh, and a musical copy of *A Christmas Carol* from three years ago.

She wanted something different, something lively and current and...oh, who was she kidding? This year had to be bigger than big. It had to be spectacular.

This year was the school's fiftieth anniversary. A simple carol concert wouldn't do. This year's Christmas show had to be huge and special and something none of the current pupils had done before. It was a shame there wasn't a heroes-of-faith play she could use. Especially as the school's houses were named after four of them—Liddell, Carey, Wesley, and

Elliot.

Each year had four forms, one in each house. The name of each form was made up of their year, house, and teacher's surname. Hence her form group was 11LU.

She shoved her hands through her hair just before she remembered the class photographs were being taken this morning. Great! Now she'd look a complete mess. The registration bell rang, and she barely had time to shove things back into the cupboard, before her form trooped in, laughing and chattering. All of them were way too happy for a Monday morning.

"What are you doing, Miss?"

Paiton stood and brushed the dust from her skirt. "I'm sorting out the cupboard and looking for something, Darius."

"What have you lost?"

She smiled. "I haven't lost anything, apart from my marbles."

Darius laughed. "Think you put them in your desk drawer for safe keeping." He took his seat, still grinning. That child was too clever for his own good sometimes.

Paiton glanced over her form. She'd been with them since they began secondary school in Year Seven. Five years later, as Year Elevens, they would be sitting final exams in May and June before moving onto sixth form or college next September. And she would begin again with the new intake.

"As you know," she began, "it's the school's anniversary this term, and I want the Christmas production to be special. But everything in there," she stabbed her finger in the direction of the offending cupboard, "is either too recent or not suitable."

"Then write one," Darius challenged her, the typical smirk on his face.

"There isn't time."

"Sure there is, Miss. Christmas is four months away."

She sat at her desk and pulled the black and red pens from her pen pot. Hmmm, maybe she should think about the idea a little more. But for now, registration. "OK who's on register duty this week?"

Darius's hand shot up. He would be. Five minutes later, registration was done, all of her class were present, and Darius was back in his seat, having taken the register to the office.

Paiton glanced around the room. "Don't forget first period is cancelled due to the class photos and Year Eleven is being done first. Make sure your ties are straight and blazers done up."

Desks banged as the girls pulled out hair brushes and combs. Makeup wasn't allowed, but a few of them pulled out mirrors to check their faces.

Francine shoved her hand high into the air. "Miss, do you want to borrow my comb?"

"I have one. Is my hair that bad?"

The teenager nodded slowly.

Paiton pulled her phone from her bag and studied her reflection in dismay. Oh boy. It was worse than bad. Her carefully brushed and set hair was a total disaster.

She rummaged for a comb and attempted to redo it. Failing abysmally, she settled for a bun and tugged a few wisps loose to soften the effect. She probably looked a sight, but she knew all the staff and children, and they'd seen her looking a whole lot worse. The school trip to Swanage three years ago being a prime

example of that.

Another student knocked on the door. "They're ready for you in the hall, Miss Underwood."

"Thank you, Sophie." She rose and surveyed her class. "OK, everyone. Please stand and tuck your chairs under the desks. Then line up by the door. One line, and keep to the left side of the corridor. And no complaining that you hate having your photo taken."

"But, Miss, I do hate having my photo taken."

Paiton grinned. "Elsie, you do nothing but take selfies. How is that any different to this? Rather, it shows how much you love having your photo taken. Right, Sara, lead off to the hall in silence, please. Other classes are working."

The class walked down the corridor, the short distance from the drama block, across the quad and to the hall. It made life easy on the odd occasion she was running late for assembly.

She could remember a time when assembly was daily. Now it was weekly with a whole school assembly once or twice a term. So much better.

"Miss Underwood?"

Paiton turned at the sound of the Irish tenor. She smiled at the head of the English department, and form tutor of 11WP. "Morning, Mr. Page." It was an unwritten rule that first names were only ever used in the staff room.

Liam Page gave her a circumspect smile. "There's a staff meeting at morning break and a full school assembly during last period."

Paiton frowned. "That wasn't scheduled."

"Tell me about it. There was a scrawled message on the white board in the staff room, but as I didn't see you, I thought I'd track you down and let you know."

"One second," she raised her voice. "Samuel Brooks! I saw that. You do not push anyone. Stand over there and don't move! Sara, take the class into the hall and get them seated. I'll be right there." She turned back to Liam. "Sorry."

Liam inclined his head. "It's fine. I've no idea what's going on, but I'm sure the Year Tens won't mind missing this afternoon's test on *Jane Eyre*. I'll let you get on." He shot Samuel a stern look as he headed down the corridor.

Paiton spun around and presented the kid with her best glower. "You have twenty seconds to explain."

"Jack annoyed me so I shoved him. So what?"

"I didn't hear a peep out of Jack. I would keep you in at break, but lunchtime will have to do instead."

"But, Miss, I have football practice."

"But, Miss, nothing." Paiton frowned in exasperation. "I will inform Mr. Scott as to why you won't be there. Go and join the others and then find me at lunch." She shook her head and followed the sulky teen into the hall.

A couple of the boys chanted, "Sam's in trouble; Sam's in trouble."

The whole class sniggered.

Paiton silenced them with a glare. "And to think you lot are the eldest in the school and are meant to be an example. I'm ashamed of all of you." She thought quickly. "I was only keeping Sam in at lunch, but since every single one of you find it so amusing, you can all stay behind after school tomorrow for an hour."

No one dared say a thing as Paiton climbed the steps to the stage and took the chair in the middle of the front row. She straightened the scarf around her neck. "Now smile for the camera."

Behind her came mutters and a scuffle. She began to turn, but something shoved her violently and then she was falling off the stage. Stars floated across her vision as she slammed onto the hard wooden floor. She thought for an instant she heard something snap, but then blinding pain had her clutching her right arm.

Voices called her name. "Miss Underwood?"

A pair of the bluest eyes she'd ever seen, set in the sternest face she'd ever come across, came into focus in front of her. "Are you all right?"

"I think..." She broke off. "I'm fine. Just landed awkwardly." She gasped as she sat up. "I need to rest for a moment."

~*~

Fraser helped the shaken woman to her feet and sat her on a chair that a helpful teenager had found. She had no colour whatsoever, and if the way she was holding her arm was anything to go by, she was as far from 'fine' as it was possible to get. On the stage to his left, her class sat in stunned silence.

Fortunately for Miss Underwood, although not for her class, he'd arrived in time to witness the entire event. Including the boys whose petty fight had started the incident. He pointed to the teenager in the front row wearing the badge saying Head Girl. "Sara, isn't it?" As she nodded, Fraser jerked his head to the main doors. "Please go and get the school nurse."

"There's no need," the pretty teacher gasped.

"There is every need, Miss Underwood," he said making sure his tone was gentle. He glanced at the student. "You have my permission to run. And fetch

Mr. Page as well."

"Yes, sir." Sara ran across the hall and into the corridor leading to the languages block. French and Spanish were on the ground floor, English on the second.

He ran a stern gaze over the teenagers on the stage. "I'm Mr. Quirke, the new headmaster. Apart from the three boys responsible for this, I want you all to line up by the door now. Once Mr. Page arrives, you will go with him and write a five-hundred word essay on the correct way to behave in school. You'll hand the completed essay to him at the end of the lesson."

The towering English teacher appeared beside him. "What happened?"

Fraser filled him in quickly, along with the task he'd set the children.

Mr. Page nodded and snapped his fingers at the class. "Off you go, and if I hear a peep out of any of you, you'll be in detention for a week." He glanced at Miss Underwood. "I'll keep an eye on them."

"Thanks," she whispered.

Fraser turned to the three boys, all with beetroot faces, looking as guilty as sin. "Go sit outside my office and wait for me."

"Yes, sir."

The Head Girl appeared with the school nurse.

"Really, I'm fine," Miss Underwood protested. "I just need to sit for a few more minutes."

"You'll let the nurse check you over." Fraser looked at the student. "Go join your form in Mr. Page's classroom. He'll tell you what the assignment is."

"Yes, sir."

Fraser slid his hands into his trouser pockets as the nurse checked over Miss Underwood. She was far

more attractive than her photo in the file had made her out to look. Despite having over forty-five staff files to read, he kept coming back to hers. There was something about her...Her long brown hair had been pulled into what the kids called a messy bun. It wasn't very professional, but it suited her.

The nurse rose. "I think it's broken. We should send her for an X-ray just to be on the safe side. Would you like me to call an ambulance?"

"Yes, please."

"There's really no need. I'm..." Miss Underwood groaned as she moved her arm.

Fraser looked at the flimsy scarf around her neck. That wouldn't make a particularly good support. Instead, he pulled off his tie and fastened a makeshift sling around her neck, sliding her right arm gently into it. "You're going to the hospital."

"What about my classes?" Her eyes lost focus for a moment.

"We'll manage today and get a sub in for tomorrow."

She shook her head. "I'll be in tomorrow." She stood, more than a little shaky.

Fraser eased her back into the chair. "Just sit there and wait for the paramedics."

"Bossy, aren't you? I didn't catch your name, though you seem to know mine."

He smiled. "I made it my business to know the names of all my staff, Miss Underwood."

"Your staff?" Her eyes rolled upwards, and losing any residual colour, she toppled from the chair towards him.

Fraser caught her as she fell. She was soft and fragile in his arms, and he caught a whiff of the most

enticing perfume he'd ever smelled. He had no idea what it was, but he liked it. He carefully laid Miss Underwood on the floor in the recovery position, hoping that wouldn't damage her arm any further.

It seemed an age before the ambulance crew arrived but probably wasn't more than four or five minutes. They clattered across the wooden flooring. "I'm Ian and this is Beth. What have we got?"

Fraser reluctantly moved to allow the paramedics access. "This is Paiton Underwood, one of the teachers. She was pushed from the stage. Possible broken arm. She passed out a couple of minutes ago." He leaned against the edge of the stage. This was not how his first day was meant to go.

The bell sounded for the end of the first period. The students had a twenty-minute break before they needed to reach their next classes. Noise filled the hallway and chatter increased as some of them cut through the hall to reach the language classes on the other side. Of course, they stopped to watch until he shooed them away. No doubt it would be all over the school before the end of break time.

Liam Page appeared with a sheaf of papers in his hand. "How is she?"

"Not great. Is there anyone she knows really well who can go with her to the hospital? I would, but we've only just met, and I have three students to deal with."

Liam narrowed his eyes as he thought. "She's friendly with Mrs. Welsh who teaches French, but as I'm here, I'll go with her. I have a student teacher this week. She's perfectly capable of covering the class for now."

"Thank you. I'll arrange for someone to pop in and

out of your classes until you get back. Does the student teacher know what to do?"

Liam nodded. "Yes. The class is reading through *Walkabout*." He pulled out his phone. "I'll let my wife know where I'll be."

The paramedic glanced up. "We'll take her in. Do you have her next of kin details?"

Fraser nodded. "Yes, I'll give them a ring and have them meet you there. Mr. Page will go with you for now. I'll text him Miss Underwood's details."

He followed the gurney through to main reception and out to the waiting ambulance. "Keep in touch," he told Liam.

Liam nodded as he climbed inside. "I will."

Fraser headed back inside. He glowered at the three shocked and silent boys. "I'm calling your parents. When they arrive, we will have a chat. Is that understood?"

"Will she be all right?"

Fraser's patience evaporated. "Will she be all right, what?" he roared.

"Will she be all right, sir?"

"I hope so, for your sake. She's just been taken out of here unconscious."

"Are you calling the police?" another kid asked.

"Yes I am. What you did was assault, causing actual bodily harm." He stalked into his office and slammed the door. He leaned against it, closing his eyes. *Lord, I know I asked for a challenge, but this wasn't really what I had in mind. Give me the words, the strength to deal with this in a calm manner. And take care of Miss Underwood. Please.*

2

Paiton settled on the sofa while her older sister, Sue, fussed around her. "There really is no need."

"Stop saying that." Irritation flared in her sister's voice. "You've said that at least fifteen times since you got home. If you're not staying at mine, then your place needs a good cleaning before I leave you."

"It wasn't dirty," Paiton protested. "And don't tell me it was. The budgies drop seed everywhere, it's what they do."

Sue put the tray on Paiton's lap. "Dinner and forget the 'I'm not hungry' line. It's your favourite—cauliflower cheese, with bonus carrots and sprouts. I think sprouts are disgusting before you cover them in cheese sauce, but you always were a strange child. From the moment you were born, you ate things normal people would run a mile from."

Paiton chuckled. "That's fine, because sprouts think you're disgusting."

Sue laughed. "Glad to see your sense of humour isn't broken. Anyway, time I went home to feed my rabble. Leave the dishes, and I'll sort them tomorrow."

"They can go in the dishwasher." Paiton waved at the purple cast encasing her right arm. "I can do that one handed. It could have been a lot worse."

"Yeah. They could have killed you."

"Hardly."

“What’s the school doing about it?”

Paiton shrugged and then wished she hadn’t as pain shot through her whole upper body. “Liam said the new Head texted him that he was calling in the parents and the police, but I guess I’ll find out tomorrow when I go in.”

Sue put her hands on her hips and gave Paiton one of those trademark older-sister-stares. “You can’t drive. And you definitely can’t work.”

“There’s a bus or I can walk. Plus, I broke my right arm. In case you’ve forgotten, I’m left handed.”

Sue sighed. “You won’t listen to reason, will you?”

“No.”

“Fine. Then I’ll get Basil to pick you up on his way into the office in the morning. What time do you leave?”

“I need to be there by half past seven.”

“Works fine as he leaves at quarter past. You finish at what time? Three-fifteen, isn’t it?”

“School finishes then. I don’t leave much before five on a good day. Sometimes it’s not until seven or eight. Hence the reason I don’t have a social life.”

“Or a boyfriend.” Her sister really was a broken record at times. “And that’s every day?”

“Oh, yes.” Paiton shovelled in a mouthful of dinner before it got cold.

“I hadn’t realised. Anyway, don’t get up. I’ll get Basil to pick you up in the morning and you can arrange the lift home with him then.” The doorbell rang. “I’ll get it.” She was back in a few seconds with a bunch of flowers. “Aren’t they lovely?” She handed Paiton a card and then vanished.

Paiton read the card. “They’re from the school,” she called. “A get well soon type thing.”