

CAN SHE CONVINCE HIM TO DANCE THIS CHRISTMAS,  
OR IS THE BALL OVER BEFORE IT'S BEGUN?

# Waltzing Matilda

CLARE REVELL



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Matilda

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### **Waltzing Matilda**

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## *Dedication*

To the namesake of the book, Tilly. She'll never read this and won't even care that she's the main character in a book. Because she's a cat, can't read, and does nothing but sleep and demand food.

This one can also be blamed on a conversation with Lisa. She said it wasn't a real book, so I had to write it to prove it was.

## *What People are Saying*

### *Down in Yon Forest*

This book was fantastic and kept me guessing. I'd read it again and would love a sequel to this story. I recommend others take the time to read and enjoy this book. ~ Chris P., PBG Booklover

### *Christmas Eva*

As a fan of Clare Revell stories, I was not disappointed. Eva asks actor Harry for an autograph then ends up in a coma following a hit and run. They "waste" a lot of time crushing on one another, but the tension of attraction keeps the story going. Harry is shocked at Eva's admission to blaming God for her life in a wheelchair. Ms. Revell tells another great tale full of grace. Top-notch, emotional, and a good example of misinterpreting what appears to be fact. ~ LoRee Peery



# 1

*December 20th*

Councillor Tilly Sullivan dropped the cordless landline phone to the desk, buried her head in her hands and groaned. This news couldn't have come at a worse time. Although on reflection, in four more days it would have been worse—a lot worse. There would have been no hope of fixing what was at the present time, simply a setback. After all, removing everything with a single trace of peanuts from the menu because one attendee was allergic hadn't been such a problem. The caterers assured her they could adapt. That was their job. This too was a similar setback. She'd adapt, find a solution and solve the problem in no time at all. That was what she was being paid to do.

Hah! Who was she kidding? This was nothing short of an unmitigated disaster of the first degree. She had no idea what to do next.

The phone rang again, and Tilly was sorely tempted not to answer it. She didn't think she could cope with any more bad news. At least, not before she'd had a mug of incredibly strong coffee. Or two mugs. Maybe more. Not that she needed to be wired any more than she already was. She was up to her eyes

in organising the Christmas Ball. Something she'd done every year since she joined the town council after graduating from university with a degree in politics.

Ignoring the phone, right along with the desire for coffee, she returned her thoughts to her family. They'd emigrated to the UK from her native Australia nineteen years ago and politics was all she'd ever wanted to do. Being the councillor in charge of the Festival committee wasn't what she had in mind, but she loved her job a lot more than she'd expected and now everyone was counting on her to deliver.

Only she couldn't. Not anymore.

She wanted to cry. To throw herself on the floor and scream, wail and pound her hands and feet against the ground the same way her two-year-old nephew did when he didn't get his own way. It wasn't possible for the day to get any worse. It was barely 9:00 AM and already her world had crumpled into a scorched mess.

The phone continued to ring. Curiosity got the better of her. Without opening her eyes, she reached out and grabbed the handset. "Matilda Sullivan speaking."

"Have you seen the news?" Millicent Awning, her best friend and personal assistant, spoke quickly and without preamble.

Tilly sighed. "No." She wasn't going to ask why, she could guess. "Why are you phoning me from the room next door?"

"I'm not. I'm currently stuck in traffic on the bypass. The Birches is on fire although you probably already know that. It's all over the radio and most likely the TV as well."

"What channel?" Did she really want to see how bad the fire was? Yes. She had to know. She crossed the

room to the TV and reached for the remote control.

“Try the BBC first. But I imagine it’d be on all of them. It’s one massive fire. Twenty pumps in attendance at the last count.”

Tilly flicked on the TV and turned to the news channel. Shock ricocheted through her as she stood transfixed in front of the box. Flames surrounded the historic eighteenth-century building, leaping from every window, licking up all four sides. An aerial view showed the roof had collapsed. It was worse than the initial phone call had made it seem.

A tiny squeak escaped, and Tilly dropped to her knees on the cold office floor. What would she do now? A small fire they could have worked around, but this...?

“What are you going to do?” Millicent’s voice dragged Tilly’s attention back to the phone. The same thought she’d had, the same question she would now be asked a million times from several different people. Over and over again.

“I have no idea. I’ll see you when you get in.” Tilly ended the call and dropped the handset to the floor beside her. “Maybe.” She blinked hard and rubbed her hands over her face.

All her hard work gone. She’d spent the better part of the last week helping the owners of the gorgeous hotel decorate the ballroom and entrance hall to match her theme. Each year was different. This year, they told her she had outdone herself. Her best yet. The ball had sold out weeks ago. Now she’d have to refund all three hundred tickets and compensate the caterers, musicians...

She broke off the thought. Guilt ran rampant. What if someone was hurt? Surely that should have

been her first concern, not the fact her planning was now literally in ashes.

She groaned again. Rolling off her knees, she lay face down and gave into the urge to scream and hit the floor. It didn't help. She sucked in a deep breath. She could almost hear her mother's voice. "Pride cometh before a fall, Matilda, and a haughty spirit before destruction."

She closed her eyes. Was it a sin to take a modicum of pride in her work? It wasn't like she was doing it for herself. OK, she'd get as much fun out of the ball as the next person, but she was doing it for the town. It wasn't Christmas without the ball. And now for the first time in the years she'd been doing the job, there would be no ball.

The phone rang again. Tilly wanted to ignore it but couldn't. Crawling to the desk, not caring how it looked should anyone be watching, she stretched up a hand and grabbed the handset. "Hello."

"Could I speak to Matilda Sullivan?"

"Speaking," Tilly muttered. She knew who it was. She'd recognise that upper class, nasal tone anywhere. Her heart sank. She rolled over and lay on her back, staring at the ceiling, wondering how much worse the day could get.

"This is Mayor Willard Browning."

"What can I do for you, Councillor Browning?" she asked. He'd been acting mayor since Mayor Stevens had died in office last month. The council were due to vote on a replacement in the New Year. The man was convinced he'd get the post hands down and made sure everyone knew it, usually by refusing to use the word *acting* in his title. Her vote was one the man wouldn't be receiving.

“*Mayor*,” he corrected.

“My bad. What can I do for you, *Acting Mayor Browning*?”

“As the ball won’t be going ahead, I need you to organise all the refunds. Starting with mine. But I want mine in full this afternoon. Everyone else can get half the money back...call the rest a non-refundable deposit.”

Tilly sat upright, outraged at the thought. “Now wait a minute. Who said the ball isn’t happening?”

“The venue is in flames as we speak. The Christmas Eve Ball is three days away. That is nowhere near enough time to reorganise anything. Never mind all the money we’ve already spent on the food and music and decorations. We don’t have an unlimited supply of funds as well you know.”

“Four days, actually,” she corrected, not bothering to keep the anger out of her voice. “It’s December twentieth today. That gives me four days. If I haven’t found anywhere by three o’clock on the afternoon of the twenty-fourth, then and only then I will issue refunds. Everyone, including you, will receive a full refund.”

“Now wait just a cotton-picking minute, young lady—”

Tilly cut the pompous man off. “I don’t have time to chat as I have a replacement venue to find. I’ll keep you informed as to my next step. *G’day!*”

Tilly ended the call. Something about the idea of not giving everyone back all their money rang an alarm bell in her head. She’d long had doubts about the council finances and had begun her own investigation into it. For now, that thought had to wait.

She turned her attention back to the television. The

knock at the door almost went unanswered, but she figured she ought to be polite at least once to whoever it was. "Come in."

A hand appeared around the door, an outstretched mug of coffee in it. "I bring a peace offering." Millicent quickly followed the cup, a manila folder tucked under her arm. "Finally got here and I figured you could use this. What are you doing on the floor?"

Tilly reached up and grabbed the cup. "Not wanting to believe that." She angled her head at the TV screen. Raising the cup to her lips, she inhaled deeply and then took a long drink. She did need it. "Thank you for this. If *Acting Mayor* Browning calls again, I'm not in. Don't put him or anyone else from the council through. Or anyone else asking about refunds. The Christmas Ball isn't cancelled. No one is getting a refund. At least, not yet. Not until I have explored every avenue as regards to a new venue."

Millicent sat on the floor beside her. She set the folder on her lap. "You think you can find one, this late in the day? And at Christmas time?"

Tilly looked at her. "It's only nine thirty in the morning."

"No, silly. I mean late in the day as almost time for the ball, not as in the time of day. I thought you'd be more au fait with the Brit-isms by now. I mean Aussie English is closer to English English than what the Americans speak."

"Nope." Tilly shrugged. "I have to try to find somewhere for the dance. The whole town is looking forward to it. Even those who don't dance come to the carols beforehand or to watch and enjoy the fireworks afterwards." She paused, a horrid thought hitting her hard. "Speaking of fireworks. Where are they?"

“Not at the hotel, if that’s what you’re worried about. They weren’t being delivered until the twenty-third. Same as always.”

Somewhat relieved, Tilly finished her coffee and set the mug down. “I have to get down there. See the damage for myself. Find out what I can do. Try to put this right somehow.”

Millicent, ever the voice of reason, picked up the cup. “They won’t let you anywhere near the fire. And the traffic is backed way up all the way around the ring road. Even if you do make it into town, there’s nothing you can do, to be honest. You know that. You’d be better off staying here and starting a ring around of potential venues.”

Tilly rose and grabbed her scarf from the back of her chair, wrapping it around her neck. “I know, but I have to do something, even if it’s just being there. Try and get my head around this and work out a solution to the problem.”

Worry gnawed at the pit of her stomach. It could still be all her fault. Was it something she’d done with the decorations? Too much tinsel? A short circuit in the many sets of lights she’d put on the tree and around the windows and paintings? Something else maybe? At least it wasn’t the fireworks being stored wrong that had caused this. What if someone died or got hurt because of her ineptitude?

The coffee turned to acid giving her heartburn. Somehow, despite the way her stomach roiled, and her heart ached, Tilly managed a bright smile. “I’ll be back at some point. Hopefully, before eleven. I’ll have a lot of work to do to try and put this right. But finding a new venue has to be my priority.”

Millicent nodded. “Oh, and that financial review

came back from Justin Marin." She waved the folder. "Where would you like it?"

Tilly paused as she tugged on her long winter coat. Justin Marin was the accountant she'd hired to look over the records for her. "Ummm, lock it in the bottom drawer of my desk. I don't want anyone reading it before I get a chance to."

"Sure thing. You're the boss."

Tilly held out a hand. "On second thoughts, pass it here and I'll do it. That way I can take the key with me."

Millicent handed over the folder, pretending to pout. "Anyone would think you don't trust me."

Tilly shook her head. "It's not you I don't trust." She locked the file away and dropped the key into her bag. "OK, you want me, you know where I'll be."

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The fire was far worse in person than it had appeared on the TV. And that was saying something as it had been pretty bad on the small screen. Fire engines parked the length of the closed street. Tilly could see at least fifteen, although Millicent said there were twenty at one point. Police tape fluttered in the breeze. Blue lights flashed from the emergency vehicles of all three services—police, fire and ambulance. Jets of water poured onto the blazing building, smoke, ash and flame, fanned by the cold winter wind, rose high into the sky in defiance of the firefighter's efforts to contain and control.

The police officer on duty had refused her permission to go through, forcing her to stand

helplessly with the other onlookers. There was a loud crash and a jet of sparks and flames whooshed into the pale winter sky.

Tilly pulled her scarf tighter around her neck as the hotel manager sidled up beside her. She shot him a sideways glance. "How did the fire start?"

Mr. Signaller wrung his hands. "In the kitchen. It's a disaster, a total disaster. I need to phone the owners."

Tilly reckoned they already knew but wasn't going to say as much. "Did everyone get out?"

Mr. Signaller shrugged. "I don't know. It all happened so quickly. We were fully booked, but breakfast was in progress, so we evacuated most people from the dining room."

"And the staff? Guests who wanted room service?" Worry gnawed her stomach.

"Firefighters were searching the building at one point. I'm sure all the maids got out unhurt."

A flurry of activity dragged her attention away from the man beside her. Two police officers removed the barricade allowing an ambulance through with blue lights and sirens.

Tilly's stomach plunged further with grief. "Doesn't look like everyone did," she muttered. She sucked in a deep breath, praying hard for all those caught up in the fire and those trying to put it out and make the building safe.

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Leonard Keely strode across the hall of the large manor house, not really caring if he got mud all over the tiled surface. He was perfectly capable of clearing

up his own mess, even if one of the few servants did seem to get there first. Admittedly it was their job, but there was something quite therapeutic about cleaning. Never mind the fact that he actually enjoyed getting his hands dirty. So long as his aunt never found out. She'd be horrified.

Pilot, a six-year-old German Shepherd, ran beside him, tramping even more mud on the floor.

Reaching the aptly named boot room, Leo tugged off his riding boots and dropped them to the floor. He groaned as Pilot shook himself, showering him with yet more mud. "You pick your moments, don't you? Bad enough the horse decided to throw me over the fence without you making things worse. You're not even my dog, and I end up looking after you."

He glanced over his shoulder. "Mr. Jay?"

The butler appeared. "Yes, sir?"

"Please could you have someone bathe the dog whilst I clear up in here and the hall? I'm afraid we've both made an awful mess. Pilot took great pains to find the muddiest puddle on the whole estate, and Ralph decided he'd rather not jump the fence and let me go on ahead."

"Of course, sir." A wry smile crossed the butler's face. He caught the dog's collar. "And don't worry about the floor. I'll have someone see to it."

Leo shook his head. "I helped make the mess. It's only fair I help clear it up."

"It's what we're paid to do, sir."

Leo chuckled. "So, you all keep reminding me. But if I bathe Pilot, the bathroom will end up flooded again. Thus, the hall floor is the far better, not to mention safer, option for everyone."

Mr. Jay laughed. "Very good sir. The hall floor is

all yours. I'll have Mary bring you a mop and bucket."

"No need. I can do it. Just point me in the right direction."

"Through the kitchen and to the left, sir." Mr. Jay tightened his grip on the dog's collar as Pilot tried to make a break for the library. "No, you don't."

Leo nodded. "I have a spare set of clothes down here. I'll change first."

The butler headed into the back washroom with the dog.

Leo removed his muddy clothes before washing the muck off his hands and face. He dressed and went to the kitchen. Hopefully no one would comment on the gaudy snowman jumper he now wore.

Arabella knew he hated Christmas, and yet insisted on buying him at least two festive jumpers a year—some worse than others. Slogans, trees, Father Christmas, reindeer, and even one with a cat...he had them all. He felt obliged to wear them for fear of upsetting her. This one he really disliked and kept in the boot room for emergency purposes only.

As he'd expected, the kitchen was a flurry of warmth and activity. Something smelled wonderful. A crash dragged his attention to the left.

Mary's face coloured. "Oh, sir, I'm sorry. It's broken."

"Don't worry about it." He shook his head. "I didn't like that dish anyway. I came for a mop and bucket. But first, let me help you here." He bent down to retrieve some of the broken pottery.

"It's fine, sir. It's my mess so I'll clear it. Won't take me a minute, then I'll bring the mop and bucket and..."

Leo held up a hand. "Mary, take a breath. It's my

mess upstairs, so I'll clear it." He winked at her. "And seriously, I hated that dish with a passion. You've done me a great service by smashing it. I do hope it wasn't clean."

She nodded. "I was about to wash it."

"Even better. No point in smashing a clean dish, it's far better to break dirty ones and save on the effort of washing them. Now point me to the bucket and I'll get it."

Mary flashed him a tiny, grateful smile. "Utility room, sir. Second door on the left."

He smiled and whistled as he headed down the passageway. He filled the bucket with hot soapy water, and carried it, along with the mop, upstairs to the hallway. His whistling got louder as he cleaned the floor. His aunt would have a blue fit and go up in smoke if she could see him now.

But this was his house, albeit by default, and if it weren't for the fact he needed the help to run it, he wouldn't have servants at all. There was also the fact he couldn't cook to save his life. He chose to ignore the fact that Aunt Mildred still treated the place like her own and insisted on servants. If she had her way, they'd have far more than they actually did.

"Leo..." His younger sister, Arabella, ran through the front door.

"Careful," he yelled. "The floor's—"

As Arabella's feet slid from underneath her, she cried out in shock.

Leo dropped the mop and caught his sister just before she hit the floor. "Wet," he continued. "Slow down, sis. Where's the fire?"

"Funny you should say that. You know that big hotel just on the edge of town? The Birches? They host

the Christmas Ball every year.”

Leo picked up the mop. “The one you’ve been going on and on about for weeks?”

“Yes.” His sister tugged off her coat and slung it on the edge of the bannisters. “Well, it’s on fire. Not much left by the looks of it.” She pulled her phone from her jeans pocket and hit the news app. She was addicted to her phone. It was by far the worst present he’d ever given her. She thrust it under his nose. “See?”

He took the phone and glanced down at the screen. “I guess the dance isn’t happening this year.”

Arabella’s face fell about a mile as she took the phone back. “But it has to. John’s going to propose there.”

Surprise filled him. “And you know this how? Did he tell you?”

She shook her head, ringlets flying around her head. “No. But I have a feeling. I mean, he spoke to you at length in the library on Tuesday and—”

Leo groaned and cut her off. “We spoke about the lease on the farm. Nothing more. I don’t know what you see in him. Aside from his ‘rugged, handsome looks’ that is.”

Arabella blushed.

Leo smirked. She’d used that phrase more than once and it was only fair to toss it back at her. “There is more to a man than his looks, you know. Besides, you’re way too young to be thinking about marriage. On top of which, he’s far too old for you. You’re barely nineteen and he’s twenty-seven and about to take over his father’s lease.”

“They have to find somewhere else to host the ball. It’s not Christmas without it.” She tossed her head

again, ignoring his comment about her age. "Not that you'd know. You never decorate the house or celebrate or come to the dance or anything."

"I wear Christmas jumpers in December, what more do you want? Anyway, you have enough decorations in your room for the both of us. Besides, I have my reasons, as well you know."

She scoffed. "Hah! Your reasons su—"

"Don't say it!" His tone was deliberately curt.

Arabella mouthed the word defiantly. Once again, she was acting more like a teenager than the supposedly mature grown-up she insisted she was. "And why are you mopping the floor? Don't we have servants for that?"

"See, that's another reason you can never be a farmer's wife," Leo chided. He'd half expected the 'you're not my father, you can't tell me what to do' retort. "They don't have servants. They have to get their hands dirty and actually do all the work themselves. They are not ladies who lunch seven days a week."

His sister pouted. "I work," she began defensively.

He groaned internally. "Volunteering at a charity shop for half an hour a week doesn't count. That's when you even bother to show up."

"Are you checking up on me?" Arabella stuck her hands on her hips and pouted. "It's not fair. No one else's brother checks up on them."

"Well maybe if you turned up occasionally, I wouldn't have to field calls from your boss wanting to know where you are. Now get off my clean floor and go and do something useful."

"Like what?"

He sighed. "I really don't know, Arabella. Stop

being a spoiled brat for thirty seconds and find something. Sign up for a college course. Learn how to cut hair or look after children or go to nursing school or something. Or sit down and figure out what you really want to do with the rest of your life. Decide what your one passion is and go for it."

His sister huffed, spun on her heel leaving a scuff mark on the floor, and flounced off.

"Or don't." Leo dumped the mop in the bucket and wrung it out harder than need be. He scrubbed hard at the scuff mark, but it wouldn't shift. Great.

A phone rang somewhere behind him, but he kept working on the floor. After a moment, Mr. Jay, looking rather wet and bedraggled, came into the hall. "There's a phone call in the study for you, sir."

Leo straightened. He leaned the mop against the wall. "Thank you. Who is it?"

"A lady. She didn't give her name. She says she's calling from the council festival committee."

"Then I will swap you the phone for this." He brushed his hands on his thighs and strode quickly to the study.

Why didn't this mysterious woman leave her name? And whatever did she want? He had nothing to do with the biannual festivals, the whole town knew that.

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Tilly tapped her fingers on her office desk. She was mad for even trying this number, but she was plum out of ideas. Her first call had been to the church, but Pastor Carson had assured her that dancing in the