



Christmastime
in London Town

CLARE REVELL

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Dedication

To the staff at Pelican Book Group whose prompts
inspired this story.

What People are Saying

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, award-winning author of *You Can't Hide*, *Night Waves* and *Drake's Retreat*

Journey to Christmas, is a step beyond the cookie-cutter holiday story.

~ Regina Smeltzer

1

The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in Him.

Nahum 1:7

Kelly Seda tapped on the office door, his stomach a bundle of nerves and a million thoughts whizzing around his brain. What could he have done wrong? He'd wracked his brains ever since he got the message five minutes ago but couldn't find a single reason why he'd been called here. No one got summoned to the principal's office mid class, unless they were in trouble or something bad had happened.

Especially if it was one of the teachers who'd been called into the office. The message had been worded in a way he couldn't ignore. As a result, Kelly had left his class of first graders in the care of his student teacher, Dana, as soon as the message had arrived. The class had been told to behave, but since it was an art lesson, they shouldn't find a reason to act out. Dana was in her final year of university—if she couldn't handle a class by now, there was no hope for her.

Maybe something had happened to his daughter, Wendy. Although surely the message would have sent him to her classroom in that case. Wendy was his world, his everything. Six and a half, precocious, and so like her mom in appearance, she was in the grade above the one he taught.

It seemed an eternity since he'd knocked. He raised his hand to tap again but didn't get the chance.

"Come in." At least Winifred Saunders, principal of Mill Creek Elementary School, didn't sound annoyed...yet.

Kelly drew in a deep breath and opened the door. "You wanted to see me, Mrs. Saunders?"

"Yes, come on in, Kelly. Have a seat. Sorry to keep you waiting. I was on the phone."

"Is everything OK?" He shut the door. "Nothing's happened to Wendy?"

"She's fine as far as I know. Please, sit."

Slightly relieved, although the raging hornets' nest in his stomach and tightness in his chest insisted otherwise, Kelly sank into the chair on his side of the desk. "Has someone complained?"

His boss smiled. "No, no, nothing like that. Some time ago you applied for the school exchange programme."

He nodded. "The middle of May, I think it was. Emma got the position. She's been in London since the semester started."

"Unfortunately, things change and for personal reasons, Emma has to fly home today. I was wondering if you'd be willing to take her place in London for the rest of the school year. They finish mid-July."

Surprise rocketed through him. The staff room gossip about Emma's return for once was correct.

However, it was almost December. A little late to change teaching staff by usual standards. Most teachers waited until the end of the school year to leave their posts.

Then the rest of Mrs. Saunders's words sank in. The job was his? Had he heard correctly? "Really? But I messed up the interview." He clearly remembered spilling coffee down his white shirt and all over the table containing files and notes.

"Actually, the panel were very impressed, despite your mishap." Mrs. Saunders opened a file in front of her. "You were their second choice. If you take the posting, you'll need to be in London and ready to start work at Cannon Road Primary School first thing on Monday morning. School starts at 8:45 AM and goes through until 3:15 PM. They have a substitute teacher until the end of tomorrow."

A myriad of thoughts raced through Kelly's mind. "I see." Monday. Today was Thursday. He'd have to pack, organise flights, and a dozen other things.

"I could simply send Tina, our exchange teacher, back to England, but that wouldn't be fair on her. Just because Emma has to come home, doesn't mean Tina should go too. Tina did sign up for the whole year, after all. This programme is as much for the betterment of the teachers as well as the pupils."

Kelly twisted the leather bracelet on his wrist. It had been the last present Fawn had bought him, and he never took it off. "Emma will be taking over my class when she returns?"

Mrs. Saunders nodded. "Yes. Emma left the UK this morning and will be back in school on Monday. You'll need to leave lesson plans and notes on the children for her." She pushed a sheaf of papers across

the desk. "Unless you need time to think, all I need are your signatures on these."

"I'd love the chance." Kelly signed the papers, heart racing in excitement. London, England. Somewhere he'd always wanted to go and never been. A beautiful city by all accounts, but especially at Christmas.

"The flight is booked for both you and Wendy tomorrow evening. You finish here this afternoon and start in London on Monday. I'm afraid it doesn't give you long to find your feet."

"I'll be fine. I'm assuming Tina will be moving out of Emma's house and into mine?" Well, at least the flight was taken care of, but he needed to make a dozen phone calls at some point today. His parents would need to know.

Mrs. Saunders nodded. "She will, yes."

"I need to talk to Wendy. It's only right she hears this from me first."

"You can do that now. It's almost time for recess. Tina can fill you in on what she teaches first-hand. Will Wendy be all right with this move?"

"She'll be fine." Kelly didn't glance up as he signed the last page. At least, he hoped his daughter would be fine with the move. She'd be annoyed not to have been consulted, but there was nothing he could do about that now.

Mrs. Saunders raised an eyebrow. "This is Wendy we're talking about here? Your daughter, the child who hates change and took six weeks to settle into her new class this semester."

"Yes, that Wendy. I think her problem was she was expecting me to be teaching grade two again this year. And I wasn't." Kelly double checked he'd signed

everything and slid the papers across the desk. "It'll be an adventure for the both of us."

Three minutes later, he strode along the corridor to the grade two classroom, situated across the hallway from his grade one room. He tapped on the door and stuck his head around the edge. He shot Tina a smile. "Sorry to interrupt, Miss Carr. Could I borrow Wendy for a few minutes?"

"Sure." Her English accent thrilled him. And to think he'd soon be surrounded by them. She turned to Wendy. "Off you go."

The bell went for recess. "OK, class. Put your coats, hats, scarves, and gloves on. I will see you in twenty minutes. Mrs. Johnson is on playground duty today." Tina opened the door to the playground, and all the children except Wendy streamed outside. It was cold but the forecasted snow hadn't yet arrived.

Wendy stayed seated at her desk and scowled at her father, arms folded across her chest. "Why is Miss Westlake taking over your class on Monday? Where are you going?"

He groaned inwardly. It never ceased to amaze him what the children picked up on even if it was murmured quietly between staff. "Let's go sit in my classroom for a few. I need to talk to you." Kelly took his daughter's hand and looked at Tina. "See you after recess? Figured we could amalgamate the classes for an hour and give Dana practice at teaching a large group. If we're both there, it shouldn't be a major issue."

She nodded. "I'll bring a notebook with me."

Wendy stamped her foot. "Tell me now."

Kelly sighed. He pulled the chair out from the desk in front of her and straddled it. He kept eye contact with his daughter. "OK. Well you know how

Miss Westlake went to England to teach, and Miss Carr came here in her place?"

Wendy nodded. "They swapped jobs and houses."

"That's right. The thing is, Miss Westlake can't stay in England after all, and she's coming home to teach my class instead."

"Why?" Wendy's scowl deepened. Her eyes narrowed. A storm was coming. Wendy was capable of throwing the hissy fit to end all hissy fits once she got going. He needed to avert it and quickly.

"I don't know, honey. However, I've been asked to go to England and teach instead of Miss Westlake. Starting on Monday and staying there until July of next year."

Wendy's face fell and her bottom lip trembled. "What about me?"

Kelly picked her up, settling her on his lap. He hugged her. "You come too. I wouldn't go away and leave you behind. We're a team, remember?"

"What about Nan and Grumps?"

"No, they won't be able to come, but they can fly over and visit at some point. What do you think about moving to London until next summer? It'll be an adventure. We'd go tomorrow."

"How?"

"On a big airplane." Kelly spread his arms wide. "Just like this."

"We'd miss Christmas. Santa won't know where to find me."

"Sure, he will." Kelly kissed the top of his daughter's head. "They have Christmas in London as well. We can ask Miss Carr about her school, because you'd be going to the same one."

"Scared," Wendy whispered.

“Me, too, baby,” he admitted. “New city, new home, new school. But we’re not alone, because we have each other.”

Wendy tilted her head. “Do they have God in England? And churches?”

His heart filled with love for the child. “Yes, baby, they do.”

~*~

Staci Kirk stood waiting outside the school entrance with the other parents. She could simply have used her staff ID and collected her son from inside the building, but she liked doing it this way. Thankfully, it wasn’t raining or snowing. That joy was yet to come—at least the snow part. It rained more than she liked to think, but then it was England, and it rarely did anything other than rain. She still couldn’t get around the fact it was December next week. She’d finished her Christmas shopping—until Tommy changed his mind over what he wanted again.

Her phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Hey, Stace, it’s me.” Her brother’s voice had a touch of an American accent, a result of living and working in various parts of the USA since he was a teenager.

She smiled, the usual warm, fuzzy feeling wrapping around her insides. She loved being with her brother and his family and talking to them was almost as good. Just not often enough. “Hi, Jim. How are you?”

"I'm good."

She laughed. "I know you're good. I asked how you were."

"I'm fine. I have a favour to ask. I'm in London for a ceremony at the end of next week. Just a two-day thing, and I'll be by myself. The base will put me up on the Thursday and Friday nights, but after that I'm on my own. The formal event finishes at five on Saturday, and the flight isn't until Sunday morning. I really don't want to go to the ball. It'll just be a lot of people getting drunk, and I'd rather come and see you as I'm in London. Can I crash at your place Saturday night? Don't say yes if you have plans. And don't go making a bed up unnecessarily because I can sleep on the floor or the couch just as easily."

"Sure. We'd love to have you any time. You know that. And I have two unused bedrooms. I'll make up your old room." She chuckled. "Remember when we stayed here as kids with Aunt Edith, and I refused to sleep in the front room because of that old elm tree?"

"The one you thought was a man standing outside the window? So, I had to swap rooms with you?"

"Yup, that one." She turned her attention to the school as the door opened and the first lot of children appeared. "Tommy prefers the back bedroom, so the front one is all yours."

"Thanks. It's the night of the sixth."

"Perfect. I shall put you on my calendar."

"Thanks. OK, better go. No rest for the wicked or those in the Air Force. Love you. Bye."

Staci shook her head as she put her phone away. Jim never changed, but then she wouldn't want him any other way.

As always, Tommy's class was the last to straggle

out. The teacher released them one at a time as she saw the parents. Staci still couldn't believe he was old enough for year one, or that it was only three weeks away from completing his first term. Where had the last five years gone?

Tommy ran over to her, waving a painting. "Mummy, look what I made! It's you at your desk doing your important writing stuff. You're wearing the snuggly jumper I bought you for your birthday."

"Hello, gorgeous boy." Staci picked him up and hugged him. She studied the painting. She looked far chunkier in that than she did in reality. But she wouldn't change her shape or body image for the world. It was her, and Tommy loved her. Nothing else mattered. "It's lovely. We'll put it up on the kitchen cupboard as soon as we get home. How was your day?"

He wriggled to be put down. "I'm not in nursery."

She giggled and set him back on the path. "I'm sorry. Mummy forgot." She admired his painting again, and then looked up at the teacher standing by the door. "You still have Miss O'Brien, then?"

Tommy scrunched his nose. "Only 'til Monday. I don't like her. We have to be quiet all the time, and she never reads us stories. Karen gets stories all the time. She says Miss Brown reads every day before home time."

She took his hand as they walked down the path to the green school gates. Tommy had inherited her love of books and reading. "How about I read instead? You can pick one of my special books, and we can read a chapter a night of that, and one of your other ones."

His little face brightened. "OK."

"And guess who's coming to see us next week?"

She grinned. "Uncle Jim. He's on his own, so he'll sleep with us for the night."

"Where's Auntie Ailsa?"

"She's staying at home with Paul and Bryony because Uncle Jim is working. And it's a long way to come for a couple of days."

"Karen's getting a baby brother. Can I have one?"

Staci stopped and gazed at him. How on earth did the conversation go from Jim to a baby brother? Jim was older than she was. "Well, you need a husband and a daddy for that. I don't have either."

He pouted. "You have a daddy even if he is miles and miles away. I'm the only person who doesn't have a daddy in my class."

"Your daddy was killed in a war before you were born. You know that." The familiar shaft of grief pierced her heart. Things would have been so different if Thomas had stayed in Cyprus and not taken the last-minute posting to replace someone who was too ill to be deployed. She ruffled his hair. "So, we'll make up the front bedroom for Uncle Jim. Do we give him grownup sheets, or do we give him the train ones?"

"He can have the teddy bear ones. Do you think he'll read to me and play football in the garden?"

"I know he'll do that. He loves spending time with you." They stopped at the busy road junction, and she tightened her grip on his hand. "It's your turn to press the button."

Tommy reached out and pressed it. "Red man means stop. Wait for the lights to change."

Staci kept him back from the edge of the road. "So, guess what I spent the day building?"

Tommy looked at her. "What?"

"A goal post. So you can play football in the

garden and score properly.”

Her small son beamed, his face lighting up. She so loved the way his smile reminded her of her late husband. “Yay. Look, green man. Come on, Mummy, let’s get home quick. I want to play football with the floodlights on.”

She shook her head. Leaving the curtains open and lounge lights on helped, but she’d installed motion activated security lights in the garden last month, and Tommy loved them.

~*~

Kelly finally got an over-exhausted Wendy into bed and asleep. She’d insisted on packing every single doll, teddy, book, and puzzle she possessed; followed by throwing the tantrum to end all tantrums when he said she couldn’t. He’d compromised by promising her new toys when they reached London. Numerous assurances that everything else would remain exactly as she left it and still be here in July mollified her somewhat.

The next hurdle would be calling his parents and breaking the news to them. He dialled their house phone.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mom. It’s me.”

“Kelly!” His mother sounded happy. “Let me put you on speaker. Roger, it’s Kelly. Is everything all right, son?”

“Everything’s good, Mom. I’m calling with some news.”

"You found a girlfriend?"

Kelly rolled his eyes, gritted his teeth, and swallowed the spear of pain that stabbed him. Fawn had been gone three years, and he had no intention of replacing her. No matter how much his mother wanted him to do so. "No, Mom. I got the job in England. The thing is, I start on Monday."

"This Monday coming?"

"Uh-huh. I fly out tomorrow."

Silence resounded.

"Mom, are you there?"

"Yes, we're here. That's a little sudden, isn't it? What about Wendy and your home and so on?"

"It's a straight swap with a teacher from London. I live in her house and work in her school. She takes over my home and job here. It would have been from the start of the semester, but the teacher they originally sent has to come home, so I'm taking her place. They asked me this morning."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Until the end of their school year, so next July."

"What about Christmas?"

Kelly grimaced. He was glad this wasn't a video call. "Wendy asked the same thing. We were wondering if you'd spend Christmas in London with us. You don't have to answer now."

"London's a long way. And we'll never get a flight this close to Christmas."

"It was just an idea, Mom." He sighed, not bothering to add the school had managed to get him one with only thirty-six hours' notice. His mother had never left Canada, despite having a passport. "Anyway, I need to go and pack. We have to be at the airport at four o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

“How will you get there?” Mom asked.

“Bryan from next door is driving us. I’m leaving the car and keys here, so that Tina can use it. She’s the teacher I’m replacing.”

“We’ll miss you. Promise to take care?”

“I will. I love you, Mom. You too, Dad.”

~*~

By the time the plane landed in London, Kelly was exhausted. They’d taken off at 6:40 PM Ottawa time on Friday and landed 6:30 AM Saturday London time. Although the flight itself was only just under eight hours long, adding in time at the airport plus the time difference, that was the best part of sixteen hours just getting to Heathrow. That was hard enough on an adult.

Wendy was beyond tired and beyond reasoning with. Not even the huge Christmas trees and coloured lights everywhere raised a smile from her. He didn’t have to rent a car as Tina’s mother had offered to collect them from the airport and drive them out to Coulsdon. With customs, immigration, and traffic it was past 10:00 AM before they finally arrived at their destination.

At long last, Wendy stopped whining as they pulled onto the driveway. She pressed her nose against the glass window. “What kind of a house is that?”

“It’s a bungalow, dear,” Mrs. Carr replied. “The bedrooms are at the front, and all the other rooms are to the back and the side.”

Wendy giggled. “That’s a funny word. Bung-a-

low. Bung-a-low. Bung-a-low.”

Kelly sighed. But on the plus side, Wendy had stopped moaning. “Thank you so much for picking us up, Mrs. Westlake.”

“Not a problem.” She helped unload the car and take the bags to the front door. “Now, all the beds are made up. There are clean towels in the bathroom. Spare linen is in the airing cupboard. There’s bread, milk, groceries, and freezer food for a couple of weeks. My number is by the phone if you need anything.”

Once inside, Kelly fell in love with the place. The combined living and dining room opened out into a huge, secluded garden, with trees on one side and a fence on the other. There was a decent size lawn running the length of one side, with a path separating the green house and what appeared to be a growing vegetable patch. Flowers ran along the borders. A huge fishpond lay just past the patio, covered in chicken wire to keep out balls and small people, no doubt. A large swing seat was angled to one side. Yes, he would like it here.

Wendy trotted back up the lawn. Where did she get her energy? “There’s a slope at the bottom of the yard, Daddy. Can we play?”

“Nap first.” Kelly beckoned her back towards him. “Daddy’s tired. How about we explore the bedrooms and put Yakki to bed.”

Wendy held up the crocheted granny square doll with a parakeet head that his mother had made her years ago. Well-worn, it hardly ever left her side, apart from school, when the toy stayed in her bedroom on guard duty. “He says he’s very sleepy.”

“I know the feeling.” He locked the patio door. “So, how about I set my alarm, and we both lie down

until it goes off.”

“Yakki says yes. But he wants lunch.”

Kelly checked his watch. “OK. Sleep until lunch, then get up, eat, and explore the house and yard properly. Come on. Before we fall asleep where we stand.” He stifled a yawn, closed his eyes, and pretended to snore.

Wendy grinned. “You’re silly, Daddy. You can’t sleep standing up. You’ll fall over and bump your head.” She ran off towards the bedrooms. “Bung-a-low. Bung-a-low.”