

A romantic couple in winter attire embracing in a snowy courtyard. The man is lifting the woman. In the background is a grand building with a dome and columns, possibly a university or government building. The scene is set in winter with snow on the ground and trees.

IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER



A
CHRISTMAS
NOVELLA

CLARE
REVELL

In the Bleak
Midwinter

Clare Revell

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Dedication

In memory of Marion, crit partner, friend, fellow author, who read an early beginning of this several years ago, and told me not to bin it, just put it away and come back to it later.

1

Will Reid kept his gaze downwards as he read the script, concentrating on the task at hand. The film he'd meant to be working on had been cancelled just as he'd arrived on set. His advance had been rescinded, leaving him without the money he'd been banking on to cover the rent and shopping the next few months. Never mind the lack of work and possible ramifications from being associated with the project in the first place.

When his agent, Jonah Nash, summoned him to his office immediately, Will honestly expected to be dropped from the books faster than he could count to ten. Or maybe even three. Instead, he'd been handed a script and told to read it over a steaming mug of coffee. Finally turning the last page, he raised his head from the manuscript in his quivering hands and grinned at his agent. His stomach turned somersaults, his heart thrilled, and it was all he could do not to punch the air and scream 'yes' at the top of his lungs.

Instead, he did the quintessential British thing. He sucked in a deep breath, kept his face impassive, and responded with a simple, yet heartfelt, "Yes. Yes, I want it. I'd do anything for this part."

Jonah crowed with delight. "I thought you might. Miss Anderson doesn't even want to audition you. The part is yours. She won't consider any other male leads from what I understand. You are her first and only choice for the role of Logan Fairchild."

Had she really remembered him after all this time, despite all the water under the bridge? And murky water at that.

Will raised an eyebrow, surprise mingling with the pleasure. "Seriously?"

"Yup. She'd like you there as soon as possible to help with the auditions for the other cast, particularly the female lead and the maid. You just need to sign the contract and the part is yours." Jonah held out a pen. "There are a couple—"

Tuning his agent out, Will almost snatched the ballpoint and scribbled his signature at the bottom of each page. The cancellation of the other film had turned from an inconvenience to a blessing in the space of a few days.

"You don't even want to know what she's offering to pay you?"

He shook his head. "Nope. You deal with all that. And money isn't everything."

"Or care about the fact it's her first play, it's on over Christmas, and it's not a pantomime?"

"Not in the slightest." Will slid the paper almost reverently back over the desk.

"Now that is most unlike you."

Will smirked. "Oh, come on, Jonah. It'll put me back at home for Christmas. It'll fill in the gap in the

schedule. And it's Felicity Anderson. What is there not to like about it? And you're making me sound way much more materialistic than I really am." He held up the script. "Can I take this?"

Jonah jerked his head. "It's yours. She wants you in Headley Cross as soon as you can get there."

Will shoved the script into his briefcase. "Tell her I'll be there first thing tomorrow. You know how to reach me." He almost bolted out of the building, resisting the urge to dance and sing his way down the steps and into the car park.

Flick had finally done it and still wanted him for the role of Logan Fairchild—the main lead in her play *Home Is Where The Heart Is*. She'd spent years writing the manuscript and always joked she'd written the role with him in mind—especially when their relationship shifted from just friends to being romantically involved. But he never in a million years imagined she'd actually get the chance to put her play on anywhere, never mind direct it herself as well. Or want him at all after what he'd done.

Tugging his phone from his pocket, he almost dropped it in his excitement. Catching it just in time, he called the theatre. He still had her number in his phone, but for all he knew, she'd changed it.

The phone was answered on the second ring. "Adelphi Theatre."

"Good morning. Could I speak to Felicity Anderson, please?" He used her formal name just so the person who took the call knew who he meant.

There were a couple of clicks and a pause. "Felicity

Anderson speaking.”

He grinned. “Hey, Gorgeous.”

Flick’s laugh as always turned his legs to jelly. “Hey, Rogue. What do you want?”

He chuckled. Her laughter was infectious. “Nothing. I’m just some strange, random bloke calling to say yes please to your job offer.” The shriek of joy down the phone almost deafened him, and he yanked it away until she’d quietened. “Not happy about that then?”

“Nope, not in the slightest.”

“Good.” He tried to still his pounding heart unsuccessfully. It had been so long since he’d heard her voice, since things had gone south between them, and he’d left. “How are you, Flick?”

“Busy. I can’t believe this is actually happening. April’s away and left me in charge. She green lighted this by phone a month back. It’s taken me that long to get as far as I have.”

Will pulled out his keys, unlocked the car, and tossed his briefcase onto the backseat. “What’s happening with the pantomime?”

“It’s still going ahead, but matinees only for the week the play is on—the actors and so on have been booked for a while, and I can’t change that. The play will be on in the evening only for the week of 14th to 19th December. It’s just five performances, but that’s better than nothing. If you could come and attend the call backs with me, that would be great. That way the actresses can bounce off you. Rehearsals start next week. They’ll run alongside the panto ones. When will

you be here?"

"I'm on my way now." He climbed into the car and fastened his belt. "Well, once I've gone back to the flat and packed. Not sure whether to drive or come by train. I can always cadge a lift in with you each day."

"A little presumptuous. And where are you planning on staying?"

"I was thinking of the room over your garage..." He broke off laughing hard, able to imagine the look of horror on her face. "Seriously, Flick, I'll bunk with my parents. I'm assuming you'll be at the theatre when I arrive later today?"

"Dawn 'til dusk, you know me. You should drive. It's cheaper, and we have a free underground car park at the theatre for the staff and actors. Just be here at nine thirty tomorrow morning. Give me a chance to run through my thoughts on actresses and costumes and so on with you before the call backs."

"Sounds good to me." Will waved at the honking driver to his left. "I'd better go, Flick. Someone wants my space. Later." He hung up and dropped the phone into the glove box. Then he waved again, started the engine, and drove out of the car park.

He was buzzing.

Flick Anderson, who'd have thought it? They went way back. Friends since senior school, they'd kept in touch. Best friends. Pity dates. The epitome of "if you're not married by the time you're thirty, then I'll marry you." Everyone had assumed they'd have married years ago and have several kids by now, and they probably would have if it weren't for his career

dragging him one way and hers another. That had been the cause of their break-up.

The friendship hadn't died. They were blessed in that respect. They had the kind of relationship where they might not talk for weeks, but always picked up from where they left off the minute they got back in touch. And the conversation always started the same way. She was Gorgeous, and he was Rogue. No one knew why.

He grinned as he drove. Well, she was gorgeous. There was no avoiding that. Her long dark hair hung to her waist, the sleek, smooth locks always reminded him of a shampoo advert. Her green eyes always sparkled with a wicked sense of humour, and her skin was so flawless it sent every other woman on the planet into fits of jealousy.

He checked his reflection in the mirror. Did he look like a rogue? His short, tousled hair was the same shade of brown, his eyes the same shade of green as Flick's, but a rogue? Still, she could have come up with a worse nickname, and if he complained she'd do so.

Will made the short drive back to his flat and parked in his designated space. He'd have to take Zadok, his beagle, but the silly creature got on just fine with his parents' dog. And that meant taking the car. He retrieved his phone and rang home.

"Reid residence. Sally Reid speaking."

Will got out of the car and gathered his things from the backseat. "Hi, Mum."

"William, so nice to finally hear from you. It makes a lovely change." His mother somehow

managed to keep the laughter out of her voice as she teased him.

"You're so mean to me," he mock-complained. "I rang late last night, and the night before. Anyway, I got an acting gig in Headley Cross. I'll be around until the end of December." He could hear the chorus of cheers in the background and guessed he was on speaker. "Is everyone there?"

"All except you, bro," his older brother, Peter, replied. "When will you be here? Will you want dinner? I'm cooking tonight to give Mum a night off."

"I'm about to pack up and head down, and I always want dinner, but not sure what time I'll be back as I need to check in at the theatre soon after I arrive. Save me some, and I'll eat it whenever I'm back. Is there any chance I could crash in my old room? I'll bring Zadok's crate and put his bed in that. It won't kill him to sleep in it for a few nights. He prefers my bed, even though he shouldn't. But if Savannah sleeps in her crate, it's not fair if Zadok doesn't."

"Of course," Mum replied. "I'll go and make up the bed. See you in a couple of hours."

"You will. Love you all." He hung up and headed inside the house. He was greeted by one crazy, barking beagle. Will dropped to his knees and made a fuss of the animal. "Hey, you. Anyone would think I'd been gone months, not an hour. Did you miss me? I think you did."

Zadok barked and licked his face.

"OK, enough of that. We need to pack. Go find your toys. We're going home to stay with Mum and

Dad. You get to play with Savannah. And we get to see Flick. Yes, we do. And you'll love her just like I do."

Will stood. The sooner he got organised, the sooner he'd get there. And the sooner he'd see Flick.

And if he didn't see her today, then there was tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and the day after the day after tomorrow. And now he had the song humming through his head from the last play he'd been in.

2

Flick glanced down at her list of prospective cast members and circled Will's name. Mind you, it was the only choice listed for the part of Logan Fairchild. As opposed to the short list of three for each of the two remaining main parts—those of Megan, Logan's wife, and Anna, the maid. They had the most stage time with Logan, and that dynamic was key to the success or failure of the entire play. Get that wrong and the ship would sink quicker than she could count to three. The other five parts she'd cast already.

For good measure, she highlighted Will's name as well. She hadn't had any doubts he'd accept. Yes, she'd written the part for him, and he knew that. But he was a busy man, always filming something, or on stage at one end of the country or the other. However, simply having his name at the top of the billing would surely pull the punters in to the theatre. Will had a huge fan base—especially since he starred as the lead in the latest TV adaptation of *Jane Eyre*.

She'd known him for years, expected to marry him at one point. She'd been sure he was planning to propose, but then he got a job offer and left without so much as a good-bye. At least they'd remained friends. He was the person who'd coined the name Flick for

her. And despite the way things ended, she'd kept it.

Flick spent the next three hours buried in paperwork and organising the call backs for ten o'clock the following morning. The main auditorium would be empty then, so she could get a feel for the actresses, and Will, on the stage.

The knock and door opening occurred simultaneously. "Come in...oh, scrap that, you are in."

Val, one of the cleaners, smiled apologetically. "Sorry to bother you. We have a problem in the ladies' cloakroom on the second floor. It isn't just mould this time."

Flick pushed her chair back and grabbed her phone from the desk. She shoved it into her bra. Maybe one day clothes designers would finally add pockets to women's clothing, and then make said pockets actually big enough to hold anything bigger than a folded-up tissue. "Show me."

She followed Val to the back stairs and up to the second floor. As they went higher, the damp smell grew more intense. She mentally added it to the note in her head of things to tell April. The ladies' cloakroom itself was cold. She touched the radiator. That was stone cold. She checked the gauge and noted it was meant to be on full. She added that to her list. "Well? Aside from the fact the heating doesn't work."

Val pointed to the wall.

Flick frowned. There was a noticeable crack in the front wall. She took quick strides and ran her finger along it. In places, the fissure was wide enough to slide in her fingertip. That wasn't good. Yes, the Adelphi

was an old building. Almost a hundred years to the date it was opened, and cracks were to be expected. But this big?

“OK, leave it with me. I’ll call April and let her know. Just close these off for now. For the time being, we’ll use the ones on the opposite side or on the other floors.”

She headed out and made her way to the back stairs. Dust lay in clumps on the floor and covered the dado rails. She turned. “Val!”

Val stuck her head out of the cloakroom. “Yeah, boss?”

“See all this dust is swept up before we open this afternoon.” She didn’t wait for a response but pushed through the stair door. She dialled April as she walked. Of course, it was the answer phone that picked up the call, not the woman in question. “April, it’s me. Maybe one day you’ll actually answer the phone, and I won’t get your voicemail. I need to speak with you. Your normal text response won’t work this time. It’s kind of urgent, so if you could call as soon as possible, I’d appreciate it. Preferably today.”

Flick sighed. Maybe somewhere in the desk was a list of who to call to fix this kind of mess. She headed back to the office with no idea where to look. Twenty minutes later, she’d turned the office into a bombsite, completely upending every file she could find. Nothing.

Seriously considering just calling the first builder in the phone book, Flick reached for the phone.

“Hello, Gorgeous!”

As she spun around, a huge smile lit her spirit and probably, her face. She couldn't see it, but she felt it. They might no longer be an item, but her love for Will had never dimmed. Something about seeing him made the darkest of days instantly brighter. "Rogue!"

Will dashed across the room and swung her into his arms. He whirled her around three times before setting her back on her feet. He kissed her cheek in his usual fashion. "I missed you."

"Missed you back. But maybe if you'd answered your phone or e-mail once in a while, you'd miss me less. It's been too long."

"It has." He dropped into her chair and put his feet on her desk. "I see housekeeping is slacking off around here. Place looks like it took a direct hit from a bomb."

"Looking for something I can't find. How did you get here so fast?"

"Fast?" He frowned. "It's almost three in the afternoon. I spoke to you around five hours ago. Did you work through lunch again?"

"Must have." She drank in his appearance, not even mad at him for putting his feet on her desk. "I can't believe you're really here."

He pinched her gently. "Yup. Not only am I in your office, live and in person, I hasten to add, I've been home, dropped off the dog, and seen my parents. Who, incidentally, decided that if I wanted my old room, then I wanted my old duvet set as well. You know, the one with the train?"

She laughed, gathering up her papers from the

floor. "You still have it?"

"Apparently so." His droll tone and sad expression made her laugh even harder.

"Oh, no." She gasped between giggles. "Please, whatever you do, don't tell my mother. Or my Billie the Elf quilt might make an appearance." She scowled as his eyes glinted. "Anyway, I have a shed load of work to do."

"Looks like it. Let me help you tidy up, whilst you carry on looking for whatever it was you needed. Or we can blow off this disaster and go for coffee."

Flick raised an eyebrow. "And leave the theatre whilst the matinee is in full swing? April would have my guts for garters for merely thinking of that."

"May I remind you that April isn't here? You're the boss. And I say you need a break because you are no good to anyone if you pass out due to lack of a nutritious meal. And I don't just mean a doughnut from the bakers on the corner of the road." He grabbed her hand. "Come on. This chaos will still be here when you get back."

She dragged her feet. "Let me grab the phone on the off chance that April returns my call. She hasn't called in weeks and tends to text instead. Eventually."

"Pffftttt!" he snorted. "Let her eat static and leave messages on answerphones. It won't kill you to go without your phone for five minutes." He tugged her to the door, grabbing her coat on the way.

She eyed him. "It might. And then what would you do?"

He smirked, giving the reply she was expecting.

“Buy self-raising flowers and throw the biggest, most expensive party the world has ever seen.”

“Planning on inviting me, I hope?”

He chuckled. “Only if you come back and haunt me.”

3

Will carried the tray of coffee, toasted sandwiches, and cakes over to where Flick sat. Of course, she'd picked the table as far away from the counter as possible. He'd picked up food for them both, even though he'd have dinner waiting for him when he got home. He'd have no problem eating that as well since it'd be the first home-cooked meal in several months he hadn't prepared himself.

She eyed the tray and shook her head. "My diet..." she protested.

"Stuff the diet. Literally." He draped his coat over the back of the chair before dropping into it. "Besides, you skipped lunch and the Flick I remember—"

"Will," she interrupted. "The Flick you remember is long gone." She reached for one of the coffees. "And I meant to ask. You're the only person who calls me Flick. I still use the name myself, though no one calls me that. Why? You never did tell me."

"Because you did that thing with your hair at school. The hair flick thing."

Flick tossed her hair back over her shoulder. "What, this?"

Will grinned. "Yes. That. All the way through school. I'd sit behind you in French and you'd do that

constantly.”

“Actually, I was trying to put you off. You were way too good at French, and I was complete and utter pants. I still am. Eva and I did a day trip to Paris on the train a couple of years ago. I knew enough French to ask where the loos were but had no idea what the bloke said in response. Fortunately, Eva was there and could translate.”

“Good thing you weren’t alone.”

Flick sipped the coffee. “Oh, I’d never have gone alone. Not that brave. So tell me the gossip from your film set. Why was it cancelled?”

He paused with ham and cheese panini half way to his lips. “Felicity Amanda Anderson. Gossip is a sin. I value my soul far too much to fall into that trap.”

“Fine. I see how it is, William Remus Reid. Only back in town for a few minutes and you’re using my full name already.” She took a bite of her food. “Call it news rather than gossip if it sounds better. Inquiring minds want...no, actually they *need* to know why the filming was cancelled.”

He quirked a brow. “How many minds do you have?”

“Two. Or three. Or maybe four. And I have no idea where the music is coming from.” Her lips twitched.

He laughed. She remembered his old, awful jokes. He had missed this, missed her, so much. He hadn’t realised how much until now. He was a fool to have left town, to have left her. Then he sobered quickly. “Who told you the film got canned? As far as I know, I

didn't tell you, and I know there is nothing in the press about it."

"Your agent told me when I rang him to see if you were available for the play."

Will finished his bite before answering. "I see." He'd have to have a long chat with Jonah. "Yes, it got cancelled. I turned up on the first day of filming to find the producer and director being hauled off in handcuffs, but that's between you, me, and this sandwich." He waved it at her. "Still, it freed up my schedule for the next four or five months. No, I don't intend to go online and find out why they were arrested. And neither should you."

"I'm way too busy to check anything online these days. And that includes social media. The theatre pages are handled by someone else." She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ears.

"Eat, Flick. Before I feed you."

A wry smile crossed her lips. "You tried that once, remember?"

He nodded, turned his sandwich over in his hand, and caught a chunk of melted cheese before it fell to the table. He licked it from his finger. "Yup. Managed to make a right mess, soup and crumbs everywhere. Your mother wasn't impressed."

"Nor was I," Flick muttered. "You're lucky I like you." She studied her own sandwich and took a bite. "Not that I do luck, but you know what I mean."

Will tucked into his meal, simply enjoying being with her. Perhaps whilst he was here, she'd agree to spend more time with him. Date him properly and not