

WHEN IS A HOLIDATE NOT A HOLIDATE? ...

WHEN
CHRISTMAS
COMES TO
TOWN

CLARE
REVELL

When Christmas Comes to Town

Clare Revell

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Dedication

For all those who learned instruments in school and still can't read music. Like me, who did end up playing for the city orchestra with her viola, and the notes written on the sheet music by Dad.

1

Ivy Eston stared at the order book on the desk. She'd read the page five times but still wasn't sure what it said beyond the order on the first line. The small pot of Christmas lights on the gaily covered desk snagged her attention. The joke was that the desk was more Christmas than desk. There were five snowmen, four carollers, three gnomes, two Christmas trees, and the ubiquitous partridge in a pear tree. Her boss, at *Carnation Street Florist*, Grace Wallac, hated it, but provided that if Ivy had enough space to prepare the bouquets, she could get away with the decorations.

When Ivy applied for the vacancy, even though she had no previous florist experience, she'd landed the job easily. It turned out she had a talent for flower arranging and was happier here than she'd been in any of her many previous jobs.

The phone in the shop rang.

Grace's voice filtered through to the back room. "Ivy. Personal call."

Ivy sighed and dashed out into the shop. It could only be one person, and she knew what that person wanted before she'd even reached the doorway. She tripped over the step between the two rooms, almost falling before she regained her balance, and grabbed

the handset from her boss. "Sorry. I'll be quick."

"You better be." Grace's tone was half amused, half serious.

Ivy turned her back to Grace. "Ivy speaking."

"Are you coming?" her twin sister demanded. "You still haven't let me know, and I asked ages ago. The party is next weekend, and I need to know numbers before I do the last-minute shopping."

Ivy rolled her eyes. "Holly, you know full well I'm coming. Just as I know you've already shopped for enough food to feed the five thousand. It's a simple family birthday party like you've done hundreds of times by now. And the numbers will be the same as they always are."

"With or without a plus one?"

"Is that the five thousand bringing a plus one or just me?" Ivy squirmed, not wanting to answer. Holly was perfectly aware of Ivy's unattached status and kept needling her about it. Besides, it wasn't as if this was the big four-oh. That was next year. She changed the subject. "Did you want to order flowers?"

"What? No? Why?" Ivy's question had flummoxed Holly, which was the point.

Ivy grinned. "Because you rang a florist, and this is the work line. Therefore, if you're not ordering either a single flower or a whole bouquet, you are interfering with shop business, and I am hanging up. Thank you for calling." She ended the call and shoved the phone back on its base with a satisfying *thunk*.

Grace raised an eyebrow. "Was that necessary?"

"Yes." Ivy heaved a sigh. "My sister won't drop

the fact I'm single, and I'm fed up with it. Tell you, if Gran wasn't ill, I'd be on a plane somewhere hot and sunny this Christmas." She paused. "Well, I would if I could afford it. As things stand, I'd be in a self-catering cottage miles and miles from here someplace wet and cold. But Gran really isn't well, and Mum wants us all together just in case it's her last Christmas or something. Anyway, these flowers won't tie themselves into a bouquet, and Pastor Jack needs the funeral ones down at the chapel before midday. I said I'd place them, if that's all right? They should have been done yesterday, but the delivery was late."

Grace nodded. "Elliott and I are attending the service if you'd rather I took them."

"It's fine. I promised I would. And I'll be back before you need to leave." Ivy headed back to where the flowers sat in a bucket next to her desk.

It wouldn't take long to arrange them in the oasis. The tricky bit was carrying them from the shop to the van and then van to chapel, without tripping over her feet. Something she did rather a lot. Pastor Jack had said he'd meet her at the chapel and let her in, so that wouldn't be a problem this time.

Taking a deep breath, Ivy picked up the first flower and began work.

~*~

In record time, Rhett Butler pulled on his fireproof trousers and boots. He grabbed his jacket and shoved his arms into the sleeves as he clambered aboard the

fire engine. It still seemed strange that he now occupied the front seat rather than one in the back, even though it befitted his recent promoted status to crew manager. That put him in charge of the six firefighters assigned to this particular engine.

Despite his rank, he was still the butt of many a joke because of his name, which had earned him the nickname Frankly. That had followed him wherever was stationed and most likely always would. He glanced at Ben who was driving. "Got the address?"

Ben nodded, hitting the sirens as the station doors opened. "It's the same road as Headley Baptist."

From behind, Jared Harkin groaned. "There's a funeral there this afternoon. Let's hope we're clear by then."

Rhett glanced over his shoulder. "Whose?" He'd been away for a couple of weeks and wasn't up to date on his church news.

"John and Kathy Prichard."

"Oh..." Rhett's heart sank. They were an older couple who sat in the same pew as he did. John had been the Station Officer who'd responded to the fire at Rhett's parents' house several years ago, and they'd kept in touch until Rhett finally ended up at the same church. "What happened?"

"Faulty boiler. Neighbour was worried when she hadn't seen them walking the dog, and the fact that she hadn't heard the dog bark for a while also concerned her. She went around to check, smelled the gas, and called us."

"Our shift got the call?"

Jared nodded. "It would have been quick. They were already in bed and asleep by the looks of it. The dog was curled up between them. I spoke to Pastor Jack. The interment is after the service, which starts at one sharp."

Rhett's vision blurred, and he blinked hard. "Maybe we should go to the funeral. I'll let control know where we are. I can keep the radio on in case we get another shout. As we're going to be in the area anyway. And John was ex-brigade."

Jared shot him a smile. "We'd like that."

Rhett nodded. "We could salute him in and out again. It'd be nice if a few more of us turned up." He grabbed the radio. "Control, this is Crew Manager Butler. There's a funeral for Station Officer John Prichard at Headley Baptist at one o'clock. Can you put the word out? It'd be nice if as many attended as possible. Apologies for the short notice."

"Will do."

Rhett put the radio back. He checked his watch. Five minutes past twelve. Hopefully this would be a quick job, and then they could line the engine up ready for the funeral.

Smoke rose as they turned into the street. Thick, black plumes came from the back of the property opposite the chapel. He guessed it was either kitchen or garden.

A woman stood outside waving at them. As the engine pulled to a halt, Rhett jumped out.

"The garden shed's on fire," the woman yelled. "My son's in there."

Rhett barked a few instructions, including a request for another engine and ambulance along with the persons reported call. There wasn't time to lose, but he trusted his men to do as he'd told them.

A white van pulled up outside the church. Stupid place to park. The driver was now completely blocking the road and would get in their way.

He headed over to the van. The driver wasn't in the cab so he strode around the back. The twin doors stood open and, before he could open his mouth to say anything, something heavy fell into him.

2

Rhett's quick reactions saved himself, a perfect arrangement of flowers, and the person behind them hitting the deck.

"You OK, boss?" Tony ran to his side.

He nodded. "I'm fine. Take these and put them back in the van." He handed over the flowers, before looking at the person behind them, one hand still gripping her arm.

"Oh. I'm so sorry."

He righted the owner of the voice, taking in her long hair, brown eyes, and worried look. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Are the flowers OK? They're the funeral ones, and my boss will kill me if I destroy them."

"The flowers are fine." Rhett let go of her arm. "But you can't park here. It's an active fire scene."

"The chapel is on fire?" She glanced worriedly at the building on her left, his right.

"No, the house opposite. By parking here, you've blocked the road and access for another fire engine and ambulance, which will be here any moment. You must park someplace else."

Colour filled the woman's face. "Oh...I, umm, won't be a moment. I don't have time for that, as I

should have been here half an hour ago. I need to..."

"It wasn't a request. You need to move the van," he said firmly.

"But the flowers..."

Rhett groaned and hoicked both arrangements out into the cold air, dumping them unceremoniously on the pavement. "Move the van. Now." He spun on his heel and headed across to the fire scene.

Behind him, he heard the van start up and then pull away. Tugging down his fireproof coat, he headed through the house and into the back garden. The shed was well alight and the flames spreading to the back fence. "Jared?"

"Kid's out and fine. Just need to put this out and work out the cause, but it's likely to be the chemistry set he was playing with."

Rhett rolled his eyes. "Chemistry set? In a shed?"

"And unsupervised. Figured you'd want a word with both kid and mother."

"Oh, I will. But one thing at a time." He jerked his head to the fire. "We get this out and cleaned up first."

~*~

Ivy's cheeks were still burning when she returned on foot to the chapel. It was bad enough she was running so late, without this. She'd moved the van around the corner and into the church car park. Two fire engines and an ambulance now almost blocked the street completely.

Pastor Jack waved as she approached. "Good idea

of yours to drop the flowers and come back. I carried them inside, but didn't place them, as I wasn't sure where you wanted them. I was hoping you'd have been here at twelve."

"I know. I'm sorry. I was running late, and traffic was really bad." Ivy nodded, not bothering to add it wasn't her idea to leave them on the roadside. Hoping that the bossy firefighter wasn't still around, she hurried inside the chapel. "Warmer in here than out there."

Pastor Jack nodded. "I turned the heat up a little."

Ivy trotted down the aisle to the front of the church. "You took the tree down. Hadn't it only just gone up? Did someone object?"

"It didn't seem appropriate to have a Christmas tree up at a funeral. It's still decorated, but tucked into the vestry for now. I'll put it back afterwards."

Ivy nodded. She tugged the elastic band off her wrist and fastened her hair into a ponytail. Her phone rang. "Ivy speaking."

"Hey, it's Grace. Elliott's been held up at work, so I was thinking maybe you should hang on for the service. Someone from here ought to be there, it being a church funeral after all."

"But I hardly knew the Prichards—except to nod to sometimes," Ivy said. "They were in your home-group."

"But like I said, Elliott is held up. I don't have the car, and you have the van. There's nothing you need to rush back for that we can't deal with. Besides, there isn't time for you to get back and for me to get there

now. So it makes sense all around. See you later." The phone went dead.

Ivy let out a deep breath. Looked as if she'd be staying after all.

"Everything OK?" Pastor Jack asked.

"Yeah." She looked at the flowers. "Are there photos going up?"

He shook his head. "No. Just on the order of service. Their daughter didn't want too much fuss. She said they'd prefer it simple."

"Then the flowers can go where they normally do on a Sunday, but one on either side of the platform." She hurried around to the cupboard to the side of the organ where the spare flower stands were kept. Grabbing the first one, she hauled it onto the platform.

It didn't take long to make sure the stands were symmetrical and the flowers were looking their best. Ivy stood back and glanced from one to the other. Then she snapped a photo and texted it to Grace.

"Are you staying?" Pastor Jack asked.

Ivy nodded. "Grace was hoping to make it, but Elliott is stuck at work. I'm here, so she said for me to stay." Ivy hesitated. "But I didn't know them and it seems like a fraud..." she added quietly.

Pastor Jack shook his head. "You can be here as a church member, a fellow sister in Christ. It doesn't matter if you didn't know them personally."

"OK. Umm, which side do I sit? Left or right?"

He smiled. "That's weddings. For funerals, you sit anywhere. Though I doubt we'll need to open the upstairs."

Ivy bit her lip. There went her normal seat. "I'll just pop back to the van for my thicker jacket. Service starts at one, right?"

"Yes."

Ivy ran down the aisle and into the cold December air. Outside, firefighters were still working, although they seemed to be packing up hoses now. She was sure there had been only two engines when she'd gone inside. Now there were three, no, four, she corrected as another one pulled up.

How big was this fire? And if they were packing up, it meant the fire was out and didn't need more people to fight it.

She ran to the van and retrieved her coat. By the time she returned to the chapel five minutes later, the number of fire engines had increased to at least six. They lined one side of the street. Firefighters stood on both sides of the road, six forming a guard of honour outside the doors of the chapel. As she walked towards the chapel, the funeral cars turned into the top of the road.

Every firefighter stood to attention and saluted.

Ivy blinked hard, a lump in her throat. Her gaze fell on the firefighter she'd fallen into earlier. His square jaw and dark eyes made him stand out from the rest. With her cheeks scorching more than she thought possible, she put her head down and scurried into the chapel through the side door. She slid into the back row, gripping the order of service tightly. The chapel was packed. And that was without all the firefighters from outside.

~*~

Once the service was over and the coffins into hearses, Rhett oversaw the final overhaul. "Whilst we're here, we'll do the door-to-door and offer the residents new smoke detectors if they want them. Make a note of all the names and addresses for now. Next shift, we'll come and fit them."

He turned as the woman from earlier left the chapel. "Give me a moment." Ten rapid steps caught her up. "Excuse me."

She turned, biting her lower lip.

He inclined his head, hoping his smile would show he wasn't still mad at her. "I'm sorry I yelled at you earlier."

She hesitated before replying. "It's fine. I probably deserved it for throwing myself and the flowers at you."

Rhett chuckled. "That wasn't why I yelled. Did you know that you're actually the first woman to have done that?"

"No one ever threw flowers at you before?"

"No. Nor given me flowers, either." He held out a hand. "Rhett Butler."

She hesitated for a moment and then gripped his hand lightly. "Ivy Eston."

His heart sped up at her light touch, but he shook himself. He didn't have time for that, now or ever. "I should probably get back."

Ivy nodded. "Me, too. I promise I won't park in the way again."

As Rhett watched her move away, her ankle twisted. He ran to catch her before she landed on the cold pavement. "You OK?"

She nodded, her already rosy cheeks deepening in colour. "Just clumsy."

He glanced down at her heels. "If you ask me, that's your problem right there. Not sure how anyone can walk on those."

"I can't, if I'm honest. But they do make me taller."

"Better to be safe than taller. You sure you can make it back to where you parked?"

Ivy nodded.

"OK." Rhett let go. "Bye, then."

"Bye."

He strode across to the others. He raised an eyebrow at the look Jared gave him. "Run out of work to do?"

Jared grinned. "You like her, and from the flustered looks she was giving you, she likes you, too."

Rhett groaned. "You are as bad as my sisters."

"Frankly, it'd be remiss of me if I didn't look out for you. Maybe you should ask her to this family thing you really don't want to go to. If you took a date, it'd get your sister off your back for five minutes."

Rhett had to admit that Jared had a point, and maybe it was something to consider. But not now. "True. But I'm not worrying about that yet. I have a kid to yell at regarding playing with chemistry sets in a shed."

3

At the end of a busy day, Ivy finally let herself into the house and toed off the evil shoes. A sigh of relief went upwards. She hated heels, preferred her trainers any day of the week, but also hated being short. At least the heels gave the illusion of height. Maybe that firefighter had a point. She couldn't walk in them and was clumsier than normal when wearing them.

Her feet slid into slippers, encasing her aching heels and toes in a fluffy, warm hug.

She should just accept the fact she never would be tall enough to reach the top shelves without help. Not that five foot two-and-a-half was particularly short, just shorter than her twin and everyone else in the family. And that she hated.

Decision made, Ivy grabbed said shoes, along with two other pairs from the shoe rack by the door. She'd toss them in the bag of clothes in the kitchen that she had ready for the clothing drive in the morning.

She flicked on the light and trotted down the hall to the kitchen. Dinner smelled good. She'd put on the slow cooker before she'd left, knowing she wouldn't

have time to cook from scratch when she got in. At least she hadn't set fire to the kitchen as Holly had that time. That would be embarrassing. Especially if *he* turned up to put the fire out.

Dumping the high-heeled monstrosities into the sack of clothes she planned to donate, Ivy tied the handles. She checked on dinner and then carried the sack to the front door. She'd put it out later.

She sighed. No, she'd do it now. By the time she'd eaten, done the dishes, and had a bath, she wouldn't want to go out in the cold to put the sack where it could be seen. Grabbing the sack with one hand, she opened the front door and carried it outside.

A blast of wind slammed the front door behind her.

Noooooo!

She dropped the bag and pushed at the door in the vain hope she'd remembered to put the latch on. But of course, she hadn't.

So here she was, locked out of her own house, in slippers and sans coat. And her phone was still in her handbag in the hall. Now what?

None of the houses around her had lights on inside yet, although most had on outside Christmas lights.

Ivy shivered and rubbed her arms. If she didn't think of something in the next few minutes, she'd freeze or catch a cold.

A car pulled into the drive opposite. Must be the new people. She'd been meaning to go over and say hello, but hadn't had the chance. Perhaps they'd let her

use the phone to call Holly who could then come over with the spare key.

Ivy checked both ways before crossing the road. "Excuse me?" She waved a hand, and then her foot went out from underneath her as she hit a patch of wet mud. "Ohhhh."

She hit the ground hard, pain rocketing up her back and her arm.

"Are you all right?"

The voice seemed familiar. She glanced up into the square jaw and dark eyes of the firefighter from that morning. And yes, his hair was as dark as she'd imagined.

Her cheeks scorched, and she closed her eyes, mortified. Not again.

Rhett hunkered down beside her, his warm hand touching her cold arm. "Ivy?"

"I'm such an idiot," she moaned.

"Are you hurt?" His hands ran over her arms and legs. "You've grazed both hands by the looks of it."

"My pride hurts more than anything else." Ivy glanced up at him. "I can't believe I just did that again."

He winked. "Third time, so you should be OK for a while now." He helped her to her feet. "Anyway, what was it you wanted?"

She looked at him, brushing her sore hands on her thighs. "Wanted?"

"You said 'excuse me' before you fell."

"Oh, yes." Ivy bit her lip, having totally embarrassed herself, again. How much worse could

things possibly get? "I was wondering if I could use your phone to call my sister. I locked myself out, and she has a spare door key."

Rhett grinned. "Let's see if I can't break in for you first."

She did a double take. "Break in?"

He laughed. "Trick of the trade." He hung his coat around her shoulders. "If I can't, you can wait in my place 'til your sister gets here. Can't have you freezing."

Ivy gratefully slid her arms into his coat and tugged it around her. "Thank you."

Rhett opened the boot of his car and retrieved a tool bag. "After you. Although, on second thoughts..." He shut the boot, before sliding an arm into hers. "Perhaps I should escort you."

"Are you sure? I mean, I might fall and take us both down."

He glanced at her feet, chuckling as he saw her slippers. "It's a risk I'm prepared to take."

Back over the road, Rhett first glanced up at the house. "Glad all your windows are shut, though that would have been easier."

"My bedroom window is probably open," Ivy said thoughtfully. "I don't think I closed it this morning, although I meant to. I always sleep with it open no matter how cold it gets."

"I'll look. Wait here."

"There's a latch on the top of the back gate." Ivy didn't argue as Rhett headed around the side of the house. The back gate would be easy for him to open. It